

# **REVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVES**

Second Series

20



**'THE DEMOCRATIC  
REVOLUTION'**

**~ A PROGRAMME  
FOR THE PAST?**

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# The Problem of Marxist Method, the Italian Left and the Decline of the Comintern

The following texts are the culmination of a debate which has been taking place in the CWO for over two years. This debate began on the question of political lineage as we recognised the need to re-examine the positions and policies of the KAPD (Communist Workers' Party of Germany) in the light of the development of our own views on the question of political organisation. It broadened out into the problem of how Marxists analyse critical periods of proletarian history.

Readers of Revolutionary Perspectives will recall the publication in RP 18 of The KAPD and The Party. This article argued that the positions of the KAPD, upon which it based its leaving of the Communist International in 1921, were mistaken, and argued that our previous identification with the KAPD's politics had to be re-assessed. In particular, the text stated that the KAPD's councilist weaknesses were reflected in its general political theories and actions. To criticise the first meant we had also to criticise the rest of the KAPD's policies and the text in RP 18 argued basically that the KAPD's views on organisation led it into many tactical errors of a sectarian nature. The danger of a repetition of similar mistakes still exists in the revolutionary milieu today. We could not eradicate the possibility of such errors by the CWO without questioning again their historical source. After some discussion, these criticisms of the KAPD were accepted by the whole organisation. However, gradually additional implications of such a re-assessment, unclear at first - even to its advocates - began to work themselves out, and led to further political evolution and the tackling of more difficult problems.

The next stage in the debate was represented by the publication of the text in RP 19, The Italian Left and the Permanent Need for the Party. This argued that the political origins of the CWO lie within the Italian left tradition, and that we critically identify with its history, in particular the way in which it fought within the Communist International in the period of revolutionary downturn after 1921. This step proved more difficult for the group to make, than a break with the KAPD, and the texts printed in this issue are part of the general debate within the CWO over the last 18 months on this question.

As the discussion progressed, it became clear that it was not simply about the question of the party, or about our historical origins, or even simply about the decline of the revolutionary wave, but about how we analyse reality and draw political lessons from it, i.e. about Marxist method. In order to illustrate these points, and bring our debate to the wider revolutionary milieu, we have decided to publish substantial extracts from texts which have appeared recently in our Internal Bulletin, representing both sides of the debate. The contributions have been edited of

tangential material and at points elaborated to be comprehensible to general readers, but otherwise they are published as written, in the heat of polemic.

Although the debate is by no means finished, it has been useful in clarifying several positions of the CWO, to the extent that we have been able to draw up a balance-sheet of the gains of the discussion. Much work remains to be done, both in the elaboration of Marxist method, and in the concrete assimilation of the lessons of the experience of the Italian Left. But the organisation now holds that:

- 1) The political origins of the CWO lie within the tradition of the Italian Left, whose history we critically identify with. We are part of a revolutionary tradition going back 60 years, and not a pseudo-group based on a set of arbitrary 'principles' drawn up in the abstract.
- 2) The counter-revolution after 1921 was a process which gradually engulfed all the communist forces established in the revolutionary wave. Unlike the decline of the II<sup>nd</sup> International, that of the III<sup>rd</sup> was a more protracted process, affecting successively the Russian economy and state, the bolsheviks and the Comintern.
- 3) The Italian Left were correct in their decision to fight this decay within the Comintern after 1921, and the German Left were mistaken to leave when invited to stay. The different attitudes of the Italian Lefts are connected to their respective views on the necessity or otherwise of the creation and maintenance of a centralised international party.
- 4) Events proved the United Front to be counter-revolutionary. Though the Italian Left were right to fight against this position from within the Comintern, today an International which advocated frontism would have revealed itself as bourgeois and we could not fight within it.
- 5) The above points are the fruit of a more dialectical method on the part of the CWO; a method which sees events in their historical context, as a process full of contradictions, and not in an abstract, formal way.

Finally, although it is always difficult to draw definitive lines of achievement in an ongoing debate, the above summing-up allows us to mark a new direction in our politics which has been gradually emerging since the publication of Revolutionary Perspectives 14. We have thus decided to acknowledge this by calling this issue No. 20 New Series.



## Text 1

### CWO, the Italian Left and the Comintern

The events of 1921 have always been extremely important to the politics of the CWO. Previously the group had held that the decisions and actions taken by the Bolsheviks in this year led to the restoration of normal capitalist relations within Russia and the defeat of the subsequent revolutionary attempts WHICH occurred in Europe and Asia. These events are: the suppression of the Moscow strikes, the suppression of Kronstadt, the introduction of NEP and later the normalising of trade relations with the world bourgeoisie through the Treaty of Rapallo in 1922. These actions were supported by Comintern policies of united fronts with the Social Democratic traitors of 1914.

The northern comrades still argue that Russia was capitalist from 1921. They recognise that the Bolshevik Party was therefore an administrator of capitalism, but think it would have been able to restore its "proletarian" class nature if the German revolt of 1923 had succeeded. Further, the draft platform now argues that the Italian Left were CORRECT to stay in the Comintern until their expulsion in 1927, and only the events of 1935-43 definitely settled doubts about the class nature of Russia.

In attempting to make sense of this, two conclusions could be drawn. The first is that we have abandoned objective analysis of history altogether and must now accept the subjective assessments of the protagonists who were actually faced with the situation we are examining. The second is that since the Bolsheviks were bourgeois from 1921, and since the only reason given for the Italian Left staying in the Comintern is a tactical one (i.e. it was a tactic which helped them to survive), working in bourgeois organisations is a tactic we now support.

#### THE QUESTION OF METHOD

The northern comrades maintain that we have changed our method. Apart from the obvious consequence that all our conclusions must also change, it is difficult to grasp what precisely they mean by changing our method. Have we abandoned the marxist method?

Surely, as marxists we recognise that objective truth exists no matter how inadequate our own or our predecessors' attempts to grasp it may be? We further recognise that the economic infrastructure of society determines the superstructure. Anomalies may exist but they cannot last long.

Therefore to answer the riddles of the Bolsheviks and the degeneration of the Russian Revolution we must turn our attention to the infrastructure - the economy of Russia. It was this which we previously did so successfully, and even today no voices have been raised denying our conclusion that Russia was capitalist from 1921. If this is accepted we must ask ourselves what was the class nature of the Bolsheviks and the Comintern from 1921. Surely this is the marxist method which will provide the key to our problems. There are only three possible answers:

1) It was bourgeois. This is the previous CWO position, which saw the superstructure of Russian society as coming quickly into congru-

uity with the infrastructure. It was pointed out that the accommodation with the international bourgeoisie, the retreat in the Comintern and the bungling of the German Revolution in 1923 were due to the conflict of the bourgeois interests of the Russian state with the needs of the world revolution. It is on this understanding that our views of the period of transition rest.

2) It was proletarian and still is proletarian. The Stalinist view.

3) It was proletarian for a while but later became bourgeois. Such an unstable position cannot last long, otherwise the whole marxist notion of infrastructure/superstructure must be challenged and with this other sections of marxism. One or two years must be the outside limit. However, if this view is taken the actions of 1921 become tactics which are admissible, and it is extremely difficult to see why all the subsequent retreats and betrayals are not similarly just tactics which we must condone.

Despite what revolutionaries may have thought at the time only one of these positions can be right. We need to consider the view that the Italian Left were correct to stay in the Comintern in the light of these possibilities.

If 1) is true then staying in the Comintern can only be justified as a tactic. If it is a correct tactic to remain inside a bourgeois organisation then we must today support not only the united front, but entryism into all bourgeois organisations. Our assessment of other political groups, in particular the Trotskyists must change.

If 2) is true the Italian Left were wrong to form the fraction in exile and the party in 1943. It is futile to consider this further.

If 3) is true then the Italian Left should have left the Comintern when the Bolsheviks ceased being proletarian, if, of course, this was before they were expelled. There must be a time at which the Comintern's policies were a hindrance, an obstacle to the world revolution and the revolution would have to be made against them as well as against the world bourgeoisie. It is therefore up to us to define that time, point out what politics it was which determined this point and say that the Italian Left should then have left the Comintern.

#### POSITION OF THE ITALIAN LEFT ON THE COMINTERN

It is clear that the Italian Left believed the Bolsheviks and the Comintern were proletarian until their expulsion. United fronts, workers governments, Bolshevisation of the Party, were regarded by the Left of the PCI as signs of the degeneration of the Comintern. Against these degenerations the Left of the PCI wished to act as an international Left Opposition. Even in 1926 when Bordiga crossed swords with Stalin, demanding that the policies within Russia be determined by the interests of the international proletariat, his criticism was as an opposition within a proletarian movement. Because this was what the Italian Left thought, this does not mean it was the truth. They were justified in thinking this just as scientists were justified in thinking the sun went round the earth before Copernicus published his observations in 1543. The lessons of history were not clear. However, we today are not justified in accepting their errors. It is up to us to clarify history.

The northern comrades argue the view that the Italian Left's experience within the Comintern helped it survive and was therefore justified. Leaving aside for the moment the other implications of this view, simply examining the history of the Italian Left shows that they survived despite the Comintern's attempts to crush them. By a process of attrition the Left was battered into silence. It is a tribute to the strength of their positions that they survived at all. We must remember the Comintern succeeded in getting what it wanted, a pliant Italian Communist Party which would do as it wanted. The Left was defeated and forced to retreat from every major engagement.

In 1922 opposition to united fronts was the position of the party. Two years later, under Gramsci's leadership, the policy of united fronts was being applied. In '22 the Comintern tried to force the PCI to unite with the rump of the PSI. Bordiga refused and finally the scheme fell through because the PSI also refused. In '24, under Gramsci's leadership, the PCI united with Serratti's PSI fraction. After Bordiga's arrest in February '23, the Comintern set about creating a leadership which would serve the interests of Russian foreign policy. From prison Bordiga attacked the united front, the policy of entering bourgeois governments and the Comintern's fusion demands as policies leading to the LIQUIDATION of the PCI. In fact they were policies leading to the liquidation of the Italian Left. On being released from prison, Bordiga found a new leadership imposed upon the PCI against the wishes of the majority of the party who favoured the Left. This majority, however, was soon to be eroded by the "Bolshevisation of the party". Between the Como and the Lyons congresses the policy of Bolshevisation, which meant elimination of tendencies opposed to Moscow, had reduced the Left from a majority to a minority. At the Lyons congress (January 1926) the Left specifically attacked the Comintern as "an organ of the Russian state", but being now in a minority they were unable to prevent the Lyons theses being accepted. These theses converted the PCI into an obedient section of the Comintern. Future resistance within the Comintern and the PCI proved equally fruitless and finally, with their base eroded, the Left were simply expelled.

How is it possible to argue such an experience helped the Italian Left survive? From being an overwhelming majority in a party of 40,000 in 1921, the Italian Left were reduced to a few dozen members in '28. Bordiga, the initial leader of the Left was silenced for 20 years. To argue that this helped the Italian Left survive is like saying that the Okhrana helped the Bolsheviks survive.

#### CONCLUSION

If we are to justify the Italian Left staying in the Comintern it can only be because the Comintern was proletarian. If the Comintern was bourgeois it is clear that not only was it not a useful tactic, but that such a position on tactics requires a major reappraisal of our politics today.

If we are to justify the Italian Left staying in the Comintern, 1921 has to go. This will entail saying that the Bolsheviks, as a proletarian party, administered capitalism - a position previously scorned by the CWO. The group cannot then avoid the task of determining when the Bolsheviks and the Comintern

became bourgeois, and amending its views on the period of transition accordingly. If we find this was before 1927 we must say the Italian Left were wrong to remain within it.

I think the only clear position is the original one of the CWO which holds to 1921. The northern comrades appear to think that because they have proved the KAPD (Communist Workers Party of Germany) did not hold our analysis when they left the Comintern in '21, our analysis itself has collapsed. To return to Copernicus, this is like saying that because he said the universe was heliocentric for the wrong reasons it is not heliocentric at all. There is no need now, and nor was there any need in the past to say that the revolutionaries who did not understand the class nature of the Comintern at the time were traitors. Holding to 1921, we can still say our lineage is with the Italian Left and the politics they fought for. We must, however, say they were wrong to remain in the Comintern after 1921.

C. Patton  
January 1982

## Text 2 Russian Revolution, Italian Revolution and the Comintern: Theses of three London comrades

1. In general the infrastructure of society determines the superstructure. Contradictions in the infrastructure produce revolution, and hence a new superstructure. During the proletarian revolution political power must be seized before any changes in the infrastructure can be made. During the period of revolution it is therefore the superstructure which reshapes the infrastructure. Thus the general relationship is reversed during the revolutionary period. This is possible because the infrastructure is in the process of being changed from capitalism to communism.

2. Because it is ultimately the infrastructure which determines the superstructure, if the process of change from capitalism to communism is halted or reversed the superstructure will be fairly rapidly (two to three years) brought into harmony with the infrastructure.

3. The CWO has previously examined history objectively. We identified the class forces which gave birth to the movements and parties of history. We judged the policies of those parties which represented the proletariat in terms of their usefulness to the proletariat in achieving communist revolution. On the basis of this we drew up what we called "class lines" and declared that anyone who crossed a class line had betrayed the working class and was therefore bourgeois. In regard to the Russian Revolution and the period of transition this led us to envisage a process of revolution which could only move forward. For us a reverse meant crossing a class line and therefore counter-revolution. This was a highly academic and moralistic conclusion. We were forced to modify it in practice when we attempted to judge other groups by this yardstick (e.g. Programma Comunista and its position on national liberation). In regard to the Russian Revolution and the period of transition we now have to conclude that



retreats are possible. The first retreat does not constitute betrayal. We do not abandon the ship the first instant it's steering for the rocks.

4. In 1917 the Bolsheviks inherited a capitalist economy. From the start of the civil war until the end of 1920 they began the task of attacking capitalist relations of production. This is in accord with thesis 1 above. However, socialist productive relations could not be built inside Russia without European Revolution and the support of the European working class.

5. The NEP (New Economic Policy) was the reversal of this process. It was the rebuilding of capitalist relations in Russia. In accordance with thesis 2 there was only a limited period of time during which the Bolsheviks could remain a proletarian party.

6. The Comintern was tied to the Russian state, unlike the earlier Internationals, and must be seen as part of the superstructure of Russian society just as the Bolsheviks were. As part of the superstructure there was similarly only a limited period of time during which the Comintern could remain proletarian.

7. The situation in 1921 presented the Bolsheviks with a choice. Either they went into opposition and let the Mensheviks and SRs take power, or they held onto power at all costs. They chose the second alternative. They were correct to do this. This necessarily involved harsh attacks on the working class.

8. The United Front policy of the Comintern formally adopted at the 4th Congress was an abandonment of the interests of the working class.

9. European revolution could have rescued the Bolsheviks at least until 1923 and permitted abolition of NEP and the return to an attack on capitalist relations of production.

10. It is a matter of principle to remain inside a degenerating proletarian organisation and attempt to reverse that degeneration. It is also a matter of principle to split from that organisation when the degeneration is irreversible. After the degeneration has become irreversible the timing of the split is a matter of tactics.

11. The Italian Left remained inside the Comintern because they saw the events of 1921 as a strategic retreat which was unavoidable. They regarded the political reversals and capitulations in the Comintern as incorrect tactics and as reversible. They stayed within the Comintern to fight for the reversal of these political capitulations. They were correct, both in this assessment and in their action.

12. Once the degeneration became irreversible the Italian Left should have left the Comintern.

13. The northern comrades maintain that we can only justify the actions of the Italian Left by changing our method of historical analysis. The analysis they present makes concessions to subjectivism. In particular the question of when to leave the Comintern is not a meaningless question. It is precisely in relation to the question of creating the conditions for the revival of the communist programme and the party that it has meaning.

14. The text in Revolutionary Perspectives 19 justifies the Italian Left remaining in the Comintern by saying it was laying the basis for the future PCInt. This was not their reason. They stayed in the Comintern to restore its revolutionary politics. In trying to do this after it had ceased to be a possibility they were broken and the proletariat was deprived of a political party for 20 years. This was a mistake.

15. These issues are directly relevant to our activity tomorrow and consequently the sections of the Platform on the Russian Revolution and the period of transition should be amended to explicitly state these conclusions.

March 1982

### Text 3

## Marxism and Historical Method

This text is a by-product of the discussion on the Italian Left and is by no means a complete statement. The debate over the Italian Left has revealed both our historical and philosophical weaknesses and these weaknesses have been responsible for some of our stumblings in practical activity (e.g. Poland). This text is aimed at clarifying some of these problems via reference to comments made by comrades in London on the so-called "new method".

Perhaps a fresh start to the discussion could be made by looking at exactly how the old CWO position, heavily influenced by councilism, was formulated. In Revolutionary Perspectives 4 (p.3) we wrote:

"The Russian Revolution was proletarian at the moment of triumph in October 1917 but it is necessary to explain why it was unambiguously counter-revolutionary by 1921, though in the intervening period Russia existed as a defensible proletarian outpost in a hostile capitalist world."

This "unambiguously counter-revolutionary" is the "old method" at its most categorical and undialectical. As it is expressed here there is no vision of a living revolutionary movement as a PROCESS. A period of history (1917-21) is described as an 18th century metaphysician might describe the universe. It is described, it is accepted as existing, but as to the historical process which brought it about we understand, or appear to understand, very little. What we must understand first of all is that history is not

"a complex of ready-made things, but a complex of processes, in which things apparently stable, no less than their mind images in our heads, the concepts, go through an uninterrupted change of coming into being and passing away ..."  
(Engels, The Dialectics of Nature)

The difficulty in the present discussion is that some comrades think that because Marxists also understand the dialectic they should be able to transcend it themselves. But Marx's warning in The Eighteenth Brumaire that "Men make history but not in circumstances of their own choosing" applies as much to revolutionaries as to anyone else. In the early 1920s

revolutionaries were faced with a unique situation in which the proletariat had seized power in a single capitalist unit and had defeated imperialist attempts to overthrow that power yet had failed to overthrow any of the imperialist governments facing it, and was itself exhausted and even decimated. Yet no revolutionary so close to the struggle could have admitted so early that the proletariat had been defeated. From August 1920, when the Red Army was defeated at the gates of Warsaw, the historical process swung against the proletariat, yet even as late as November 1923 proletarians took to the streets with arms against the bourgeoisie. No participant could have seen this as the definitive end of the revolutionary wave.

When we used to assert against those councilists who look for formalistic reasons for the end of the Russian Revolution, that counter-revolution in Russia is indissolubly linked to counter-revolutionary success elsewhere, we were applying the dialectical method. However, once we got to 1921 we used to abandon this for the assertion of the primacy of Russian internal affairs over the international revolutionary situation. As Lenin wrote,

"Marxist dialectics as the last word in the scientific-revolutionary method, excludes any isolated examination of an object, i.e. one that is one-sided and monstrously distorted." (The Collapse of the Second International JD's emphasis)

The CWO's change of views on this has given another example of the operation of the dialectic (albeit a limited one). The CWO has gone through a process of breaking with councilist formalism and this was actually begun in RP 4 with the recognition that in each historical movement we must identify "the general thrust". However, this only emphasised the contradictions of holding onto views taken from the councilists of the German Left as well as from Bolshevism and the Italian Left. As the process of change worked towards the latter we developed these contradictions to the point where a decisive break was needed.

CP's view is that the "CI was tied to the Russian state". This assertion that the CI was totally dominated by the Russian party is again undialectical. There is no doubt that, by virtue of its success, by virtue of the fact that Moscow was the only possible seat for the CI, etc. that the weight of the Russian Party did carry undue influence in the CI. However, those who see it simply as an arm of Russian foreign policy have to explain why public factions were banned in Russia in 1921 but not until 1926-7 in the CI. The work of the Italian Left within the CI is evidence that there was still, however feeble, some revolutionary life in that body. Again, one-sidedness leads to ignoring important facts or to simplistic assertions.

There are other examples of undialectical expressions in many of the writings which have appeared out of London. Before answering these though, it is necessary that we deal with the permanent cry from London, for clarification on the issue of "dates" and where we stand in relation to our political rivals. In the past we have been very successful at making political capital out of our defence of 1921 as the 20th century "Thermidor". Comrades are understandably

worried by the adoption of a method which requires more skill to defend. Having seen the incompetence with which the ICC has failed to defend dialectical method, this concern is even more understandable! Relying only on empiricism and eclecticism the ICC is incapable of providing a coherent understanding of the events of the early 20s.

However, it should now be clear that if we understand history as "a complex of processes" the idea of placing a single date on a multifaceted experience like the Russian Revolution is simply seeking a child's explanation of history (before 1921 = good, after 1921 = bad) which in no way corresponds with reality (unless we go back to a) defending the Kronstadt programme as proletarian and b) see NEP as the culmination of the counter-revolutionary process - a difficult thing after 3½ years of what we call a "generally positive" "general thrust" rather than the beginning.) If we are to see 1921 as the accumulation of large numbers of counter-revolutionary changes which made that year a QUALITATIVE break with the revolutionary past then we have to revise our whole estimate of the period 1917-21 (and therefore of the nature of the October Revolution itself). We can point to a whole series of steps which appear to signal a decline in the revolutionary process from 1918 onwards but it is much more difficult to say when these steps became that qualitative transformation. Revolutionaries of the time had less possibility of identifying the decisive transformation. Even in nature, which often consists of dramatic transformations of quantity into something qualitatively different, it is not always possible to say when the precise moment of transformation takes place. To take the simple example of the transformation of a tadpole into a frog, it is easy to observe the starting point and the finishing point but at precisely which point does the observed specimen change characteristics? It is the same with the events surrounding the gradual growth of counter-revolution after the Russian Revolution.

The last concern expressed by London comrades was the fact that the text on the Italian Left either simply described the actions of the Italian Left or criticised their errors only as "subjective". This was intrinsic to the method. First, the text sought to lay out the objective situation in which the Italian Left found itself, then it sought to show that they identified the correct priority (defence of an autonomous proletarian body, both inside and later outside, the CI). In doing this it was following Trotsky's advice that:

"The history of revolution, like every other history, ought first of all to tell what happened and how. That however, is little enough. From the telling it ought to become clear why it happened thus and not otherwise." (Preface to the History of the Russian Revolution)

And we have continuously asked critics of the Italian Left what "ought" they to have done differently in these circumstances? What could they have done? CP suggested that they failed because they were eventually kicked out of the CI, and because Bordiga retired from political life. Yet, as Battaglia Comunista and ourselves have pointed out often enough, the Italian Left was not just Bordiga, and organically it did provide the only prole-



tarian response to World War Two. By the measure of every other communist current at that time of despair this was an astounding success which cannot be belittled. The contrast with the fate of the German Left is clear evidence that when we talk of real solutions (and not just imaginary options dreamed up by revolutionaries long after the event) the Italian Left's achievement is all the more remarkable. All this of course does not mean that we are arguing for a suspension of our critical faculties in regard to the Italian Left. What we are arguing for is that whatever its faults, the Italian Left is our tradition and its basic defence is essential to the overall framework of our positions, despite criticisms of specific actions.

Defenders of 1921 appear to support the view that if the Italian Left was right to stay in the CI in the 1920s then we should be in the Labour Party today. This is precisely the kind of one-sidedness that accompanies all undialectical thinking. By focussing on one common aspect these comrades manage to construct two apparently similar syllogisms. (X is counter-revolutionary  
Revolutionaries were in X, ergo  
Revolutionaries can be in counter-revolutionary bodies)

This completely obscures the nature of the differences between that nature of a revolutionary body in decline and a body which has never been other than counter-revolutionary. "Extending the logic" of something is simply a form of bourgeois thought, a form of idealism based solely on one element of the contradictory forces operative within the dialectic. Whereas the dialectic is a method for understanding a real historical process, formal logic is simply an idealist exercise which, in the realm of thought is capable of taking you anywhere.

#### THE THESES OF THREE LONDON COMRADES

These theses are intended as amendments to the Platform but as they stand they are in fact rather confused. Thesis 1 begins well enough. "In general the infrastructure of society determines the superstructure" but quickly becomes a little over-simple. "Contradictions in the infrastructure produce revolution and hence a new superstructure". For most of history "contradictions in the infrastructure" do NOT produce revolution, though they do produce class struggle. Revolution only occurs when the exploited class "can no longer tolerate the conditions" (Lenin) brought about by the contradictions of the old infrastructure when the exploited seek to overthrow the superstructure. The significance of this becomes clear in thesis 2 when it is declared that the contradictions between superstructure and infrastructure can last at most 2 or 3 years. This is a legacy of the old method and as demonstrated earlier, it is not possible to put a finite time limit on the contradiction between infrastructure and superstructure. This is especially true in the world transformation of the infrastructure which in the period of global civil war might take years (after all it took the proletariat 3½ years to defeat imperialism in Russia alone.)

Thesis 3 arrives at the correct conclusion by the wrong method. The CWO did not examine history "objectively" previously, but rather, "formalistically" and the conclusion that "retreats are possible" can only be reached if

we understand that the dialectical unfolding of history means that revolution moves, not in a straight line, but more in a spiral which turns occasionally backwards towards its point of origin, but tendentially moves towards another goal. If the comrades look at the real events of 1917-21 they will see that they too are littered with setbacks (from Brest-Litovsk on) yet the idea of a counter-revolution before 1921 has never been put forward by anyone in this current debate. Some comrades might think it is pedantry to insist on correct method if the point about "retreats" is agreed from another method. But this is precisely the significance of this text. We may often agree about points of fact or even particular views but unless we locate them in a similar method then we will not necessarily be as cohesive or as coherent on the next issue. Lenin's attitude was stamped with this line of thought, as is shown in a letter to Inessa Armand (December 1913) when he attacks the failure of his own party members to understand the reality of their new tasks because they don't understand the method behind them.

"Comedians! They chase words without thinking about how devilishly complicated life is, producing ENTIRELY NEW forms which we can only partly "catch on" to. People for the most part (99% of the bourgeoisie, 98% of the liquidators, 60-70% of the Bolsheviks) don't know how to think, they only LEARN WORDS BY HEART. They've learnt the word "underground" firmly. They can repeat it. They know it by heart. But how to change its forms in a new situation, how to learn and THINK ANEW for this purpose, this we do not understand."

We have got to learn to think anew and apply ourselves to solving new problems as they arise. An understanding of the method of dialectical materialism is a necessary first step.





Returning to the Theses, the need to think dialectically can also be seen in theses 4 and 5 where the points are separated and thus divorced from their essence - which is the contradiction between the two processes (it is in fact the class struggle) and this in fact vitiates most of the other theses which are FORMALLY correct but expressed in an undialectical fashion. In fact this tends to be the consequence of the thesis method of presentation since the historical process tends to be fragmented (a notable exception to this is the Rome Theses where the thread between each thesis is never broken.) Theses 6, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14 are erroneous and have been answered already, apart from 10 which makes a "principle" out of necessity and therefore is totally redundant.

Much work needs to be done on our understanding of marxism as the scientific method of revolution. The CWO has in the past been criticised as "academic", today it is criticised as "activist". Let's hope that in our process of self-education in marxist method we demonstrate the falsity of both slanders.

J. Dominie  
May 1982

## Text 4 The United Front - August 1914 of International Communism

The first aim of this text is to examine the claim that The Italian Left and the Permanent Need for the Party represents a step away from formalism towards "a more dialectical approach" to understanding the degeneration of the first revolutionary wave (RP 19 p.31). It is our contention that this is not the case. There is nothing particularly dialectical about the view that the Comintern degenerated gradually, rather than suddenly. The sudden transformation of things into their opposite, as happened to the class's organisations in August 1914, is part of a dialectical understanding of history. Quantitative changes accumulate, then a sudden qualitative transformation takes place. We intend to show that what JD's text claims to demonstrate, it does not. We will put forward an alternative re-evaluation of the Comintern's degeneration.

It may be that it is formalistic to say, as DG Place did, that 1922 was the "correct" time to break from the Comintern. It may be that some revolutionaries should have stayed in the Comintern till some later date (1923 for example). But JD isn't trying to say this. What he wants us to believe is that there was no correct date for a split - this is why he puts the word "correct" in inverted commas. If he succeeds in convincing us of this, then we have to say that any date for splitting from the Comintern is equally formalistic and equally wrong. If this is accepted, then the fault of the German Left was not that they were sectarian and wrong to split the Comintern too early and on a tactical basis. Their mistake was to split at all. If "dialectic" is accepted in the group, then we have to accept that the tendency which fought inside the Comintern, which refused to leave until it was expelled, the Italian Left, was

necessarily correct. It couldn't have been wrong. It is difficult to see what lessons we can draw from this if we accept it. The problem of a proletarian organisation becoming counter-revolutionary for instance, does not arise. We don't have to worry about when an organisation has degenerated beyond repair - the duty of revolutionaries is to stay in it until they are expelled.

JD does not say whether or not his method applies to any other example of a proletarian organisation degenerating. He does not say for example, how long revolutionaries should have stayed inside the Social Democracy, although he does say that the degeneration of Social Democracy was an example of a sudden degeneration, whereas that of the Comintern was gradual:

"... for the first time in history a proletarian organisation was captured by almost imperceptible degrees by the bourgeoisie" (p.31)

This claim is never demonstrated - it remains a mere assertion. The evidence for this assertion is "imperceptible" in the text. Nevertheless if the "method" is to be taken seriously, it would have been wrong to have split Social Democracy in 1914. If the question of when the Comintern finally degenerated is "meaningless" for revolutionaries, then surely the same must apply to other Internationals, otherwise we're not really using the method. If revolutionaries were correct to stay in the Comintern until expelled, rather than until it became irreversibly bourgeois, then it must follow that they should have stayed inside Social Democracy until expelled. JD does not say what are the lessons for any future International. Is it the case that it could never be correct to split from the future International Communist Party? If the answer to these questions is "no", then the "method" is not a method at all. JD could attempt to answer this (and he does) by saying that the Comintern was a unique situation for the class, and that therefore the old lessons do not apply. But every new situation contains unique features - it is the similarities with the old situations which enable us to draw the same lessons. According to Newton, as far as possible, for similar effects we ascribe similar causes - this is the scientific method. For JD and the majority a unique feature in a new situation means that the old lessons no longer apply. The lessons of history change with every new situation. In other words, there are no lessons of history.

### SUBJECTIVISM AND MATERIALISM

"Thus the degeneration of the Comintern took a different, more gradual form from that of its predecessors." (RP 19 p.35)

This claim is made NOT on the basis of the objective evidence, but because

"the united front was seen as a holding position to retain mass support until the conditions for a direct assault on capitalism revived." (ibid, our emphasis)

This is the subjectivist analysis of what should be seen as the objective role of the Comintern in attacking the independence of the working class by fusing with bourgeois centrists and fronting with unions, social democrats and fascists. We will return to the

question of the United Front later. First, what do we mean by subjectivism? As can be seen from the above quotation, JD believes that it is possible to derive the actual function of an organisation from the subjective intentions of its members. In reality, the objective function of an organisation can be widely at variance with what it thinks it is doing.

Having allowed subjectivism to creep in, JD prepares to abandon objectivity completely. This is the case with his claim that there is no meaningful answer to the question, "when to leave the Comintern?" Revolutionaries were surely correct when they thought there was a meaningful answer to the question - when to leave the 2nd International? So why not the 3rd? Because it was a different situation? One suspects that this is simply an attempt to avoid drawing any political conclusions from the "new method".

Before his final attempt to justify the struggle within the Comintern after the United Front, JD makes the offhand remark that revolutionary outbreaks during the Twenties "might have led" to a reversal of the opportunist tactics of the Comintern. An examination of the real history of this period instantly shows that this is fallacious, that there was no chance of a reversal of these tactics at this time. According to JD's text:

"... revolutionary outbreaks were expected which might have led to a complete reversal of the opportunist tactics of the Comintern. The fact that the attempts to reverse the political course of the Comintern failed does not mean that we can condemn the efforts of revolutionaries to do this" (op.cit. p.36)

Perhaps not, but the Comintern's counter-revolutionary sabotage of those outbreaks which did occur shows that those revolutionaries were wrong to try to change its course. It was the duty of revolutionaries to play a vanguard role in leading the workers away from a counter-revolutionary body, not into it. If we just accept that revolutionary outbreaks were "expected", we are basing our evaluation of the Comintern on nothing more than the subjective wishful thinking of its members. Nevertheless, JD is forced into this position by the fact that a brief examination of his original examples, the British General Strike and the Chinese Revolution, starkly reveal the post-United Front Comintern as an arm of the bourgeoisie.

In the first of these events, the Comintern called for all power to the TUC, and in the second, the Comintern directly caused the massacre of the communists and workers by the Chinese nationalists. If there was any revolutionary potential in the late Twenties, the Comintern was foremost in crushing it, in the interests of the bourgeoisie. These outbreaks did not lead to a change in the Comintern, in fact the Comintern contributed to their defeat.

We have to draw up a balance sheet of all the Comintern did during this decade, during which all communists agree, it became an instrument of international capital. We have to work out at what point its degeneration in this direction became irreversible; at what point, on balance, its activities became more useful to the bourgeoisie than they were to the proletariat. That point was the latest point at which revolutionaries should have split.

JD implies, but does not state, that splitting a proletarian organisation on a tactical issue is a priori mistaken.

"Why did the KAPD split from the Comintern in 1921 over a tactical issue?"

he asks, as if such a thing were unheard of. But he does not explain why it is always wrong to split a party over tactical differences.

If we reject JD's simplistic view, then the question of when to split from a degenerating party becomes even more difficult. Not only do we not wait until we are expelled, but there may be a time at which we could be correct to split an organisation before it had even become bourgeois. If this is the case, then the question of when to split an organisation is itself a tactical question. If so, we still need principles on which to base such a tactical decision. These principles will have important implications for the future party.

At what point should a left-wing opposition split from a degenerating party? This is one of the most difficult questions we have to answer. But we can't avoid it by saying, "wait until you're expelled". We have to answer it by looking at the concrete results of our predecessors' practice, and learning from their mistakes. We can only do this if we identify their mistakes as mistakes.

#### CRITERIA FOR A SPLIT

Braving the risk of being accused of formalistic thinking, we would like to re-state categorically that there is a point at which a degenerating proletarian party becomes counter-revolutionary, and that this is the latest point at which revolutionaries can remain inside it. What are the principles for deciding when this point has been reached? At its simplest, proletarian politics can be reduced to two basic elements:

- 1) Independence of the proletariat from the bourgeoisie.
- 2) Internationalism.

If either of these two elements is completely missing from a political organisation, it is a bourgeois organisation. There are obviously dubious cases, e.g. the Centrist parties 1914-18; it is admittedly a simplified rule of thumb.

However, it is as clear as day that in 1914 most of the parties of the Second International abandoned number 2, internationalism, and became irrevocably bourgeois.

It is also clear that at the end of 1922, the majority of the Comintern abandoned number 1, the independence of the proletariat from the bourgeoisie, and also became irrevocably bourgeois.

The evidence for this betrayal can be found in any work on the period, including The Italian Left and the Permanent Need for the Party. For example, JD makes it quite clear that the 1922 4th Congress of the Comintern adopted the policy of the political United Front. Is this not overwhelming evidence that the Comintern had abandoned the proletariat for the bourgeoisie? There are two reasons why JD advances for rejecting this view. One is simple subjectivism again, the other is an attempt to base the evaluation of the Comintern on its objective practice after the United Front's adoption in 1922. This latter



point is more complex, and will involve an examination of the difference between the United Front "from below" and the political United Front. The United Front is a complicated question, but we can't avoid it by saying that the Comintern's twists and turns around this 'tactic' show that "... the Comintern's capitulations did not proceed along a straight line" (p.40).

The political United Front, adopted by the Comintern Congress in 1922, was a complete capitulation to the bourgeoisie. For a working class party to form a political alliance with a bourgeois party in the electoral field, as the Comintern instructed its member parties to do in 1922, is just as much of a betrayal of the proletariat as forming an alliance with a section of the bourgeois state, as social democracy did in 1914. Otherwise, we are obliged to draw a class line between different sections of the bourgeoisie. Perhaps Ebert wasn't quite as reactionary as Ludendorff? To put it another way, Social Democracy's betrayal in 1914 was essentially the formation of a united front with the bourgeoisie.

The revolutionary party is anti-frontist by definition. Under decadent capitalism, the proletariat has no interests in common with any section of the bourgeoisie. A party which forms fronts with the enemy class is acting in the interests of that class. This is as true during 'peacetime' as during war. The only alternative to this is to draw a distinction between peacetime United Fronts and wartime ones. This would be absurdly formalistic, and would create more problems than it solves. Capitalist 'peace' is only a preparation for war in any case.

If this basic principle is accepted, how do we explain the Comintern's abandonment of the United Front at its 5th Congress? JD wants us to see this as evidence that the Comintern had not crossed the barricades at this point. Unfortunately, this leaves him with the unwelcome task of establishing when it did cross the barricades. But he does not face up to this task squarely. Instead, he tells us that the Left Fraction of the CPI accepted the need to establish an exact date, and tells us the date they decided the "moment of betrayal" occurred - July 14th 1935!!! (p.41).

At least the Italian Left realised the need to decide when the Comintern became bourgeois, and 1935 was a fairly logical date for them to adopt at the time. Today, JD remains agnostic. This is not satisfactory. We have to adopt a definite date, and if it was before the Italian Left's expulsion, we have to say they were wrong to stay in the Comintern.

Without actually saying it, JD hints that the adoption of the 'social fascist' view of the bourgeois left by the Comintern at its 5th Congress represented a reversal of its degeneration (p.40). Unfortunately, this position was simply another example of the Comintern sabotaging the class struggle. Separately from the political United Front, there is what is known as the United Front "from below" without in any way forming a political alliance with a bourgeois faction, the communist party obviously has to work with workers who are influenced by the bourgeoisie. For instance, it is necessary to accept delegation onto a strike committee alongside social democrats. To reject this type of "united front" is simply to be a sectarian saboteur. This is exactly what the Comintern was when it told its members to reject any co-operation with the 'social fascists'.

There is one final argument which JD uses to

try to justify the Italian Left remaining in the Comintern during the middle and late twenties - the 'survival' argument. This is the idea that by remaining in the Comintern, the Left increased their chances of survival. But, as has been pointed out, the evidence used - that the German Left disintegrated outside the Comintern - is worse than empiricism. But it surely must be obvious that it would have been easier for the Italian Left to survive outside the Comintern, an organisation which made every effort to politically exterminate them. The 'survival' argument is like saying that lions help deer survive by hunting them.

The text, The Italian Left and the Permanent Need for the Party makes valuable points, particularly the point that, as the Italian Left recognised, the fact that the party is the only permanent body the class can have under decadence, means that the party is a permanent need of the class. However, in its attempt to prove that the Italian Left were correct to stay in the Comintern, it fails. What we still need to do is to make every effort to go over the history of the Twenties to establish at what point the Comintern became bourgeois. We must accept this point as the latest the Italian Left were justified in remaining in the Comintern. We should not fall into the trap of abandoning our own achievements out of awe at the achievements of our political parents.

GP/EM  
August 1982

## Text 5 Dialectical Method and the Revolutionary Wave

### INTRODUCTION

The arguments about the Italian Left and the Comintern in the 1920s are arguments about what we, as a revolutionary party, will do in the next revolutionary wave. It is therefore essential that we assess the last revolutionary period critically. In seeing the Italian Left as the tradition from which we come we are not obliged to take an uncritical attitude to this tradition. Such an attitude will oblige us to repeat their mistakes tomorrow.

The northerners, by rejecting the London thesis 12 (Text II), now seem to think that even when the degeneration of the Comintern became irreversible, i.e. when it became bourgeois, the Italian Left should have stayed within it. This is why for them there is no meaningful answer to the question of when to leave the Comintern. This means, if it means anything at all, that in a future revolutionary period where an International exists and degenerates we will never quit it even when it is totally captured by the bourgeoisie. We will remain within it as a loyal opposition.

When the CWI began re-evaluating its previous positions it was argued by the north that this was as a result of a "new method" of historical analysis. London has consistently asked for a statement of what this method is and with the publication of Marxism and the Historical Method in the Internal Bulletin 4 we imagined that this was what we were getting. Instead the text contains no statement at all of what

this so-called "new method" is - a truly astounding omission when previous texts from London and the London Theses are dismissed as using an invalid method.

The consistent failure of the northerners to give a coherent statement of the "new method" shows that the conclusions on the Italian Left and the Comintern are not derived from a new method at all, otherwise explaining the method would have been integral to explaining the conclusions. Instead the conclusions were reached first and the so-called "new method" brought in to support them afterwards. Dragging in an undefined and half understood method to support conclusions already reached by another route is highly dangerous. It is for this reason that the question of method must be seriously tackled.

#### DIALECTICAL METHOD

The only consistent statement about the new method is that it is dialectical. Since the whole group would agree that our historical method should be dialectical it is clear that completely different understandings of the meaning of dialectics exist within the group. This must be our starting point.

Engels remarks in *Anti-Duhring* that "Dialectics is nothing more than the science of the general laws of motion and development of nature, human society and thought". Dialectics is thus the science which enables us to grasp the dynamics of the world, to explain change and reveal causes, the moving principles, of historical processes. It locates the source of motion of historical processes in their internal contradiction. Contradictions are united within a process. The struggle of these contradictions, and this struggle's development determines the development of the process itself. For example, capitalist production necessarily involves socialised production and private capitalist appropriation of the products. This is the principal contradiction of capitalist society. Without it capitalist society cannot exist. Further, the development of this contradiction determines the development of capitalist society itself. We predict by the dialectic that, for example, capitalist appropriation will be destroyed by its incompatibility with socialised production. In this contradiction is located the source of society's motion. Class struggle, wars and revolutions can be traced to this primary cause.

Engels, in his writings on the dialectic drew up certain laws governing its operation which are worth stating.

- 1) Quantity beyond a certain point changes into quality. For example, a minimum amount of money is needed before this money can function as capital.
- 2) Development takes place through unity and struggle of opposites. For example, as described above, socialised production and capitalist appropriation which give rise to the proletariat and the bourgeoisie are united in capitalist production. The conflict between them expressed in the class struggle is the motor force of capitalist society.
- 3) Negation of the negation. In the historical movement of the dialectical process what one started with is negated and this in turn is negated, leading back to a higher form of the original. For example, private ownership is the negation of primitive communism. Private ownership as it develops through slave

society, feudalism and capitalism generates within itself forces which negate it. This new negation of private ownership finds fulfilment in communism.

The dialectic is therefore a science for understanding the motion and development of processes. The dialectic tells us how to understand things and what to look for. Political conclusions, however, can only be drawn by means of logic and the lessons of the class struggle.

It has been implied by the northerners that the dialectic is a system of logic which replaces formal logic. This is untrue. Formal logic is a branch of logic. It is the study of logical form, logical truth and logical implication. It reduces arguments to symbols or diagrams, i.e. it formalises them, in order to test their validity. It necessarily deals with fixed entities and does not allow for change or development in the entities it deals with. It obviously cannot do this any more than mathematics could operate with variable integers or with changing rules. To reduce arguments to their form in order to test their validity is extremely useful and to dismiss it as bourgeois is absurd. Further, the attack on formal logic implies an attack on logic itself - attacks on abstraction and generalisation such as we have seen. All logic abstracts. All general thought does this. Dialectics is not, as has been implied lately, a replacement for logic - a new system in which illogical contradictions, non sequiturs and invalid arguments or absurdities are perfectly permissible. On the contrary, it merely prescribes the area in which logic can be applied. General concepts abstracted from specific circumstances still have to be used. The dialectic which understands and takes account of change tells us where they can be used.

Now clearly the CWO's previous historical method was dialectical. We did not just set about equating things regardless of their contexts; on the contrary, we recognised development, denoted periods of ascendant and decadent capitalism and did not extend our conclusions from one into another without due regard for the context. The positions on trade unions, parliament, reformism, the national question, to mention just four, are examples of this. To state as we did in RP 4 that the Russian Revolution was proletarian at the moment of triumph but counter-revolutionary by 1921 clearly shows an understanding of change, in fact, a dialectical understanding. Nothing could be further from formal logic, and to say this is an example of formalism and that our previous historical analysis was formalistic is simply ridiculous. However, once we recognise situations as being similar we project conclusions from one to another. Thus we predict the bourgeoisie will go to war and the Trotskyists will support them. This is the operation of logic within areas where the dialectic allows it to operate. Most of our Platform relies on this type of operation. To imply, as the method text does, that where dialectical processes are at work no judgments can be made is tantamount to ripping up the Platform. Dialectical processes are at work everywhere and we have got to make judgments.

Hence the dialectic must be used to understand historical processes and the contexts in which events take place, but within this understanding logic must be applied. (Marx himself



uses formal logic in volume I of Capital. See for example, his refutation of Nassau Senior's claim that all the capitalist's profit was produced in the last hour of the 11 hour day - (Chapter 7.)

#### PERIOD OF TRANSITION AND THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

During the proletarian revolution the proletariat must seize political power, and this power must be extended over a large area of the capitalist heartlands before any meaningful change in the infrastructure can be brought about. During the period when political power is being consolidated and extended the infrastructure remains capitalist and therefore works to overturn the proletarian state power which, in this period, appears as a superstructure in contradiction with the infrastructure. This is the principal contradiction of the early transition period. State power tends to alter the infrastructure and the infrastructure tends to abolish the proletarian superstructure. For the proletarian state this contradiction appears as firstly the need to extend the revolution internationally and secondly, as the need to retain political power internally. The latter involves running capitalism internally, negotiating with imperialism, trading, etc. In short, surviving. It is in this contradiction that the dynamic of the early transition period is located. Two processes are in balance. Either the revolution is extended and the capitalist infrastructure is eroded, or the state will be forced to make compromises which transform its proletarian nature and it will be brought into harmony with the infrastructure. This contradiction cannot last an indefinite length of time. Previously the CWO had recognised the instability of this period, an instability derived from the nature of the contradictions which are its motive force. As Marx emphasises in the German Ideology,

"The social structure and the state are continually evolving out of the life process of definite individuals, but of individuals not as they may appear in their own or other people's imagination, but as they really are; that is, as they operate, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will."

That Marx saw the transformation of the superstructure by the infrastructure generally as a fairly rapid process is shown in the following quotation from the Preface to the Critique of Political Economy where, speaking of revolution generally he says,

"With the change of the economic foundation the whole superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed."

This was almost exactly the situation within Russia. With the ending of the civil war and the failure of the European Revolution, economic concessions had to be made and the proletarian state began to retreat. Capitulations were made to the capitalist infrastructure and over several years the proletarian state was transformed into a bourgeois one corresponding to the infrastructure. Now clearly this was not accomplished without a struggle - a struggle of opposite processes which we understand as a dialectical struggle - but it was accomplished none the less. That it was accomplished without violence means simply that the class character of the state changed without a change of the actual personnel. Such a change is in accord with the second law of dialectics above. With the completion of this change the transition period ended and the principal contradiction became once again that between capital and labour

How precisely was this brought about? By an accumulation of retreats and capitulations which effected a qualitative change in accordance with the first law of dialectics. What was the situation of the Comintern in this process? As JD points out himself in the Italian Left text (RP 19 p.31), after 1922 the Comintern became "simply an instrument in the hands of the Bolshevik government". With the transformation of the class nature of this state the Comintern fairly quickly became another branch of the soviet superstructure. The situation described above can be adequately explained and understood by the use of the dialectic, the question of what revolutionaries do when caught up in such a process cannot, however be answered by dialectics. The question of action can only be decided by logical application of the lessons of the past to the present situation. Now, speaking generally, an organisation which is irreversibly degenerate, that is bourgeois, cannot regain its initial proletarian nature and to attempt to restore this nature is a waste of time. This is a lesson we draw from history. Further, we conclude from history that revolutionaries should leave bourgeois organisations and give the proletariat a lead in combatting and destroying them. Only by political action independent of the bourgeoisie can the revolution be made.

This means in regard to the Russian Revolution and the Comintern that once the Comintern was irreversibly degenerate the communist fractions remaining within it should have left

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as this was the only possible way the world proletariat could have regained the path to world revolution. This conclusion results from a dialectical understanding of the situation within which the lessons of the previous class struggle are applied.

#### POSITION OF THE NORTHERNERS

The northerners, however, draw totally different conclusions. Firstly, they see the material situation as different. JD in the method text concludes, in opposition to the passage from Marx quoted above, that contradictions between the infrastructure and the superstructure can last indefinitely. In reaching this conclusion he confuses contradictions within the infrastructure, which he notes can last almost for ever, with contradictions between the infrastructure and the superstructure. Since the former can go on for centuries he concludes the latter can as well. Theoretically, according to his view, there is no reason why the Russian government should not still be proletarian and the world still going through a transition period. This is a complete reversal of the previous CWO view and must be based on a different understanding of the contradictions of the transition period.

Further, JD now maintains the Comintern was, after 1921, in a dialectical relationship with the Russian state. Now you can't be in a dialectical relationship with an instrument so presumably he has now abandoned his view of RP 19 that the Comintern was an instrument in the hands of the Russian state. On what could such a dialectical relationship rest? Contradictions, in the Marxist sense, are unavoidable. They are necessary contradictions. The bourgeoisie cannot abolish them without the collapse of the social system. However, those contradictions which the bourgeoisie can abolish it does abolish. If the Comintern was in a dialectical relationship with the Russian state which was capitalist, as JD recognises, such a relationship must be traced to the conflict between capital and labour, the Comintern representing world labour. JD then has to explain how a bourgeois state can support and nourish a proletarian political body with which it is in dialectical contradiction, when such a contradiction is not only not necessary, but could be abolished. We must conclude that either the bourgeoisie has gone mad or that the Russian state is not yet capitalist. Thus, attempts to credit the Comintern with revolutionary life inevitably lead back to the Russian state which must also be seen as revolutionary - something JD denies.

In the method text JD advances two arguments to support the view that the Comintern was in a dialectical relationship with the Russian state and therefore that it was proletarian. The first is that the banning of public factions only occurred in 1926, whereas the Bolshevik party banned factions in 1921. This is an example of the use of formal logic where it cannot be used. The second is that there was still life in the Comintern as long as the Italian Left were in it and acted as an opposition. This is in fact part of a larger argument for the Italian Left remaining inside the Comintern which goes like this:

- 1) If the Comintern had revolutionary life in it the Italian Left should have stayed within it.
- 2) As long as the Italian Left remained within the Comintern it had a revolutionary life in it.

- 3) Therefore the Italian Left should have remained within the Comintern.

This is an example of the logical fallacy of begging the question. Through these arguments the northerners conclude that the situation during the period of transition is far less urgent than the CWO had previously maintained.

#### THE REAL ARGUMENT

JD in the method text recognises that there is a point at which an accumulation of capitalisations produces a qualitative change. The example of the tadpole changing into a frog, while having nothing whatsoever to do with a change of quantity into quality, does indicate something else. Namely that a point can be recognised at which such a process is complete. There is a point at which a tadpole can be judged to have changed into a frog and the process of transformation to be accomplished. To say that the exact second cannot be determined is irrelevant. To look for the exact second is, in fact, highly undialectical and inevitably leads to hopeless paradoxes such as those posed by Zeno. We are interested in the point at which the process is complete, the point at which a revolutionary organisation has changed into a counter-revolutionary one. It is at such a time that a split is required. Initially the argument of the northerners rested on the view that such a point could not be determined by revolutionaries at the time and therefore they could not be blamed for failing to act on it. This was the celebrated hindsight argument which, though perfectly correct in itself, led to the conclusion that as they didn't have hindsight, we could draw no lessons whatsoever. The argument has progressed from there to the conclusion, reached in the method text, that even if such a point could have been determined by revolutionaries at the time, they should not have acted on it. The conclusion stated bluntly is that, there is not, nor can there ever be, any justification for leaving an organisation which was once revolutionary during the revolutionary period.

#### CONCLUSION

This text has been written with the following aims:

- 1) To define our historical method of analysis more accurately.
- 2) To point out that uncritical identification with the Italian Left is leading to positions on tactics and principles for the next revolutionary period which are dangerous.
- 3) To point out that these positions are not derived from a Marxist method of analysis, and further that they cannot avoid being extended to the rest of our politics.
- 4) To affirm that if, in the future revolutionary period the International degenerates to the point of abandoning the independence of the working class and internationalism, we must be prepared to split the International.
- 5) To affirm that it is irresponsible to blindly remain within an organisation during the revolutionary period because it was once revolutionary. Such action means the fate of the world revolution is determined by the fate of that one organisation.
- 6) To have these conclusions incorporated in a text in Revolutionary Perspectives.

CP/EM  
August 1982



## Text 6

### Undialectical Method and the Italian Left

"What these gentlemen all lack is dialectics. They always see only cause here, effect there ... that everything is relative and nothing absolute - they cannot grasp at all." (Engels to Schmidt, October 27th 1890)

#### THE ITALIAN LEFT'S FIGHT AGAINST THE UNITED FRONT

Our first point of departure with the Dialectical Method text is with the premise.

"The arguments about the Italian Left and Comintern in the 1920s are arguments about what we as a party will do in the next revolutionary wave."

This is historically wrong since the 1920s was a period of counter-revolution not revolution. The argument here is thus about how to face a) a downturn, and b) a defeated revolution. Clearly this is not the same as the question of how to overthrow capitalism, but even in respect to fighting a downturn the Italian Left fought an exemplary fight. It was the only section of the proletariat to put up a systematic fight within the working class against the United Front policy. Thesis 30 of the Rome Theses (which is quoted in RPs 3, 11 and 19 (p.37)) clearly shows the communist position on opportunism when faced with the growth of the counter-revolution. The Italian Left put the reconstitution of the party (initially via a return of the Comintern to the path of revolution, later by organising outside it) as their guiding principle. This remained their principle when they debated (from 1925 on) the question of when to split from the Comintern. It remains our principle today.

In their various texts CP/EM seem to forget that the Italian Left vigorously fought (and never allowed to be applied in Italy) the United Front. Repeatedly CP/EM have asserted that the Italian Left's opposition was a loyal one. This is a slander, since not only was it the only public (i.e. real) opposition to the degeneration of the Comintern, but also - by not applying the United Front - they openly challenged its validity in front of the working class and challenged the Comintern to expel them. On this point the comrades fall foul of their lack of any method whatsoever. They support the Italian Left's view on the party but they don't see that the nature of their opposition to the Comintern was intrinsic to this. In fact we can see the connection between the way all the major oppositions confronted the decline of the Comintern and their fundamental political bases. The German Left, failing to see the paramountcy of the party, thought it more correct to split than fight, even though invited to stay in. The Trotskyists supported the United Front and thus never comprehended the real cause of the counter-revolution which they saw in terms of personalities and led to a largely secret opposition (i.e. they were the real loyal opposition). To attempt to escape from the fact that only the Italian Left's struggle in the Comintern provides us with the basis for communist work today, all CP/EM have to offer

is eclecticism - the Italian Left were correct on the party but got it wrong on when to leave the Comintern. (Although 60 years later they still can't tell us when this should have been. CP's first text said 1921, his second 1922, whilst we are also offered "probably 1923").

For us the Italian Left were correct to stay in the Comintern until expelled because a) staying in didn't lead to any concessions to the counter-revolution and b) on the contrary, it helped to clarify the basis for reconstitution of the party. In a counter-revolution the forces of the revolution were bound to be decimated. The strength of the Italian Left is not only that it stood its ground, but that it also made the most orderly reformation of its ranks once the full weight of that defeat was obvious. CP/EM's only argument for getting out of the Comintern earlier than 1927 is that they could have raised the banner of communism for the masses to follow from an independent position. This is in fact the position of the KAPD in 1921. ("The world revolution goes on its way, we are going with it in its service.") Like the KAPD CP/EM overlook the fact that there were no masses to follow a split, since they still followed the Comintern. Thus, though we can agree that the United Front and a whole host of other policies are obviously a sign of imminent bourgeois victory, and that we would conduct a vigorous fight against them, the question of when to split is conditioned by the trajectory of the international revolution. We can't simply apply lessons by rote from the past, but must apply a Marxist framework to every specific circumstance - but this brings us back to the question of method.

#### MARXIST METHOD

"London has consistently asked for a statement of what this method is..." and has continually expressed disappointment that they have never been given a Philosopher's Stone to convert their formalist dross into dialectical gold. "Marxism and Historical Method" comes under particularly heavy attack since instead of outlining dialectical method (something Marx didn't do) it attempts to demonstrate the difference between dialectical and non-dialectical thought by taking the utterances of various comrades as examples. This is in fact the way Marx went about it. Marx, as a rule, didn't present abstract treatises on method because he believed that the method was revealed through the demonstration of its operation. In a letter to Kugelmann he explained why, (for "value" read "method")

"Even if there were no chapter on value in my book, the analysis of the real relations I give would contain proof and demonstration of the real value relations. The nonsense about proving the concept of value arises from complete ignorance of the method of science. The science consists in working out how the law of value operates."

CP/EM's own attempts to get to grips with method via the "Dialectics of Nature" further underlines their formalism. After simply outlining the formal laws of dialectics framed by Engels they go on to specifically deny the validity of dialectics for real life!

"The dialectic tells us to understand things...Political conclusions can only be drawn by means of logic."

Dialectical Method and the Revolutionary Wave

But Marxism isn't based on syllogisms, however true they may be, and the CP/EM announcement that the CWO's previous method was dialectical is truly astounding. To demonstrate the false nature of this claim, and inter alia, to underline their formalism we will re-examine two erroneous positions held by the CWO in the past.

It is precisely the application of the laws of dialectics that enable us to reach political conclusions and frame our practice. We must begin by understanding the general laws of motion of historical development, and previous proletarian activity within it, then we must examine the specific context to which we seek to apply our general laws and understand how it differs from previous situations because:

"... even the most abstract categories, despite their validity - precisely because of their abstractness - for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of the abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historic relations, and possess their full validity only for and within those relations." (Grundrisse p.105)

CP/EM today, and the CWO in the past, have too often proceeded from a specific point by means of formal logic to erroneous generalisations because we have failed to look at the totality of a problem. As Lenin wrote, the main feature of undialectical thought is its one-sidedness. We gave some examples in the text Marxism and Historical Method but we have only to look at how we reached an originally pacifist position on the military question by using simply formal logic. The syllogism here was:

War is anti-proletarian  
Conscription is a step to war, ergo  
Proletarians oppose conscription

Only a detailed examination of the Marxist position on war in general, on a study of the specific nature of war in our epoch, enabled us to go beyond a mere pacifist response to it.

The group as a whole is, step by step, abandoning this wooden formalism, but another example of it can be taken from the Dialectical Method text (and which is a repeat of an old CWO error). This is the CP/EM statement that "objectively the Russian state and the Comintern were counter-revolutionary from 1921". In other words, for them the counter-revolution began and ended in 1921 (the old CWO view). There is no vision of a process here. Instead we are given another piece of formalism:

The Russian state became counter-revolutionary in 1921  
The Comintern had been set up to defend the Russian state, ergo  
The Comintern became counter-revolutionary by 1921 (or 1922 just to give formalism a dialectical air!)

The truth is more complex. The counter-revolution after 1921 gradually engulfed the Soviet state structure, economy and party and the demonstration of the completion of this process was when the Comintern was no longer able to tolerate any opposition and expelled the Italian Left in 1927. (Comrades need only compare the offer of a place in the Comintern to the KAPD in 1921 with the expulsion of the Italian Left to see the beginning and end of the process.)

The second statement has already been ex-

plained, but it should be emphasised that it was not simply the physical survival of the Italian Left which demonstrated the merit of staying in the Comintern, but rather the ultimate political coherence which stemmed from this struggle.

The basic "argument" of the Dialectical Method text goes like this,

The Italian Left stayed in the Comintern when it was frontist  
The majority of the CWO defend the Italian Left for doing this, ergo  
The majority will tolerate, or even support frontism in the future.

The truth of the matter is not only will we not tolerate united fronts in the future, but it is a slander to say that the Italian Left did so in the past. In conclusion, we will respond to the 6 points in the text, Dialectical Method and the Revolutionary Wave. We reject 1) totally since, as the foregoing shows, CP/EM have confused the issue and have not identified the problem (as the Italian Left did fight the United Front).

2) We repeat for the nth time that we are not uncritical of the Italian Left. (we are critical of the illusions they held about the CI between 1927-33; we are critical of their early abandonment of the leadership of the PCI, etc.)

3) Our method is dialectical, the minority position is empirical (and usually erroneous at that), not to mention abstract and formal.

4) We will split an International if it betrays an established principle (e.g. united front, imperialist war) but if it's a new issue we must fight within it to establish the principle.

5) Is a truism, but does not describe the situation of the Italian Left in 1926, since it was not fighting in a revolutionary period.

6) The decision to publish this debate in our press will be made on the grounds of its contribution to revolutionary clarity.

J. Dominie  
October 1982

#### Footnote

1. See the article "Communists and the Military Question in Revolutionary Perspectives" 18

## Text 7 August 1914 of Empiricism

"The whole swindle of induction is derived from the Englishmen" (Engels)

The appearance of the text by CP and EM, The United Front - August 1914 of International Communism is welcome, in that it states in a clear form the theoretical and historical aridity of the views they defend.



## A SHORT PREAMBLE

CP and EM make the allegation that the CWO's politics are being forced into a procrustean bed of 'uncritical' admiration for the Italian Left (IL). Let us once again assure our little England empiricists, armed for their last stand behind a channel of formal syllogisms, that their fears are unfounded. A reading of Revolutionary Perspectives 19 and Internal Bulletin texts reveals consistent criticism of the IL (need we mention AGAIN - on the break from the PSI, on the national question, etc.) Let us hear no more about our supposed idealisation of the IL. Such accusations are red herrings and actually arm our adversaries. Having, hopefully, dealt with this let's briefly look at dialectics.

Calling for an explanation or demonstration of the new method is 'unmethodical'. We don't draw up abstract dialectical systems, and then apply them to reality; our task is to show dialectics operating in reality,

"The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and their material conditions, both those already existing and those produced by their activity. These premises can be verified in a purely empirical way." (Marx, German Ideology)

This is the real materialist method, and whatever incidental errors they may have made, the texts in Revolutionary Perspectives 18 and 19 on the German and Italian Lefts are the demonstration of the "new method". They are analyses of a real historical process in terms of its context, its movement and its contradictions. This is how we must look at the decline of the revolutionary wave and the nature of the communist international (CI). Let's contrast the (often faulty) empiricism and (often illogical) formal logic of CP and EM, with what, for want of a better word and at the risk of offending our critics, we might call a dialectical method.

## CONTEXT

The whole CP/EM text is underlain by a view of the identity of the situation of revolutionaries in the 2nd and 3rd Internationals in 1914 and 1922. The syllogism here goes:

1914 and 1922 were analogous situations  
It was right to leave the 2nd International in 1914, ergo  
It was right to leave the 3rd International in 1922

Even if our politics were based on syllogisms (which they are not), each of the premises must be true and the conclusion a valid deduction; this is often not the case with CP and EM.

In 1914 the question of imperialist war had been debated for 15 years, and programatically incorporated into the positions of the proletariat (Stuttgart Resolution, 1907), as well as practically combatted by the International, for example the Spanish-US War, Boer War, Russo-Japanese War, etc. Thus, 1914 was a rupture with a clearly established proletarian position. But 1922 was an entirely novel situation, and the question posed was how to maintain contact with the masses in a period of reflux. The United Front was a policy designed partly to defend the interests of the

Russian state, moving towards an accommodation with the international bourgeoisie, and partly as an (erroneous) tactic to win the reformist masses to the communist banner. The opponents of the United Front argued that the policy would have disastrous results, and it did in Germany in 1923 and in China in 1926.

There can be no parallel, no identity made, between splitting from an International which breaks with a firmly established proletarian principle, and from one which makes a disastrous capitulation/error in a desperate situation. To form a Burgfrieden with the bourgeois state, as the 2nd International did in 1914, is not at all the same as advocating a united front with parties which held sway over the mass of the European workers, in the erroneous belief that this policy would destroy these parties, open the way to a new working class upsurge, and end Russian isolation. No one could, or did, claim that 1914 was a 'tactic' to overthrow capitalism, however erroneous.

The weakness of CP and EM's arguments are shown when they try to refute the idea that a reversal to a 'social fascist' view of the social democrats shows that the decline of the CI was not unilinear. Arguing that this was not an advance, but in fact sectarianism (How can a bourgeois organisation be sectarian?) they virtually argue for a united front from below. This shows the fallacy of parallels with 1914. Could we have advocated a united front from below to the mass of the bourgeoisie (though not their organisations) in 1914 to prosecute the imperialist war?

CP and EM caution us to be 'objective' (since everyone knows Marxists are not subjective). They tell us that whatever revolutionaries thought they were doing in the early 1920s, the CI was objectively bourgeois by being frontist. (Frontism is gradually transformed into 'tolerating' it and then 'supporting' it!) Against this piece of bourgeois-by-error amalgam we have to re-assert that revolutionaries can make mistakes without becoming part of the bourgeoisie, even though these mistakes objectively aid the class enemy. (For example, Bolsheviks at Brest-Litovsk, KPD during Kapp putsch, Bela Kun forming a government with Social Democrats in 1919, etc.) We reject the wooden logic of,

An organisation does X  
X aids the bourgeoisie, ergo  
That organisation is bourgeois

One really has to be a master "dialectician" to argue that the United Front policy in China and Germany which led to the crushing of the proletariat was designed to do so, and to argue that "The Comintern was foremost in crushing" the working class in these events; the Reichswehr and Kuomintang are simply spirited out of the picture. The Popular Front, on the other hand, was designed to contain working class upheaval in the interests of the Russian state and its bourgeois allies, and in Spain the CP actively policed the repression. This is a much closer parallel with 1914 than the United Front, which is definitely a stage in CI decline, but much more analogous to the capitulations of the 2nd International before 1914 (joining of bourgeois government in France, electoral pacts with bourgeois parties in Germany, etc.)

The United Front proved to be a disastrous policy which aided the stabilisation of

capitalism after 1921. But since the CI was only becoming bourgeois, and not yet so, it was right for the IL to stay within it and fight against this policy. The lessons on the United Front have since, and not accidentally by the legates of the IL, become incorporated into the proletariat's programme. Thus, to advocate frontism today isn't wrong, it's counter-revolutionary, and to stay in an international advocating it wouldn't be correct, but would be opportunist and wrong. For CP and EM this is incomprehensible and inconsistent. Quoting Newton to give a scientific flavour to their formalism, they argue that similar causes (should) produce similar effects, or

We would be wrong to stay in a frontist international in future  
The CI became frontist in 1922 and the IL stayed in it, ergo  
The IL left were wrong.

But unfortunately it's our Newtonians who are wrong. What they fail to realise is that these situations are only formally similar, in content they would be different situations, since 60 years of history has passed between them, and the issue was only posed the first time, and has been resolved prior to the second. CP and EM are terrified by the prospect that history may not repeat itself exactly in the forms of the past, and the lessons of the past may not be posed in exactly the same way tomorrow. We are told that if (in their words) the lessons of each proletarian experience are different, then there are no lessons. Each revolution, each counter-revolution, poses new problems and lessons, and these are successively incorporated into the proletarian programme.

#### CONTRADICTIONS AND MOVEMENT

Reality is a process of complexes, not states,

"To the metaphysician, things and their mental reflexes, ideas, are isolated, to be considered one after the other and apart from each other, as objects fixed, rigid and given. He thinks in absolutely irreconcilable antitheses ... For him a thing either exists or it does not exist; a thing cannot at the same time be itself and something else ... Dialectics on the other hand, comprehends things and their representations in their essential connection, concatenation, motion, origin and ending ... In this system the whole world, natural, historical, intellectual is represented as a process, i.e. in constant change, transformation, development."  
(Engels, *Anti-Duhring* pp31-34)

The process of decline, the counter-revolution began in Russia in 1921. It didn't end there, and neither did this instantly transform all the previously communist forces into bourgeois factions. The Russian economy, then the state, then the Bolsheviks and finally the CI felt the effects of this cancer in a speeding process. But although the Bolsheviks' unambiguous emphasis on international revolution had gone after 1921, it's too metaphysical to see them instantly simply as agents of Russian capital. They were in a contradictory relationship with the section of international capital they found themselves in charge of, and at the same time as they were trying to seek an accommodation with the bourgeoisie, they were still trying to end Russian isolation, even if tactically erroneously and without effect

(e.g. Germany 1923). If this is true of the Bolsheviks, it's even more true of the CI, which wasn't directly attached to the Russian economy or state apparatus. Under pressure of defeat and Bolshevik moves to defend Russia a process of decay gathered pace, but the CI was even more so the area of play of contradictory forces (opposition of IL to United Fronts; of Indian CP to national liberation; the Fischer/Maslow fight against opportunism in Germany, etc.). The demand to freeze this historical process, and to extract yes or no instant class definitions (if the Russian economy was capitalist, therefore the Russian state was bourgeois, therefore the Bolsheviks were bourgeois, therefore the Comintern was bourgeois) is the metaphysical method Engels criticises. No one could say that until the defeat in China in 1926 and the expulsion of the IL that degeneration was irreversible. The following is, however, how the Londoners reason:

Revolution was needed to regenerate the CI  
Revolution didn't come, ergo  
There was no chance of regeneration and the IL were wrong

To say that fighting to save the CI was "retrospectively" wrong, is like saying the Bolsheviks were retrospectively wrong to seize power in 1917. They "hoped for" (a piece of pure subjectivism?) a revolution to save them, but any empiricist could tell them 60 years later that this didn't happen. Doubtless the fight before World War One against the degeneration of the 2nd International was also "retrospectively" wrong, since it too was fruitless? All these remind one more of the logic of Lewis Carroll than of Aristotelian syllogisms.

The movement out of the period of capitalist ascendancy (war and revolution) in which the decay of the 2nd International took place is profoundly different from that of reflux and decline of a revolutionary wave in which that of the CI occurred. In the latter case mass struggle and the formation of a new party is not immediately practical. In that situation what was needed was a principled fight in an organisation grouping millions of revolutionary proletarians, even though it was degenerating. All sorts of questions had to be answered before a split was possible. Is decay irreversible? Has the fight against it clarified the issues at stake? Is survival outside possible? The process of breaking from a degenerating International in a period of revolutionary decline is thus a complicated one, in the absence of a 1914 situation. A resolute defence of proletarian positions is essential, and this will eventually lead to expulsion. When an International can no longer tolerate a principled proletarian opposition it is correct to leave it. Thus Bordiga and the IL were right to fight and force the Comintern to expel them.

"There is no need to try and split the parties and the International. We should allow their mechanical discipline to reach its logical conclusions ... without ever compromising our critical ideological and political positions ..." (Bordiga in a letter to Korsch)

Compare this with the KAPD position of abandoning an International in which they had been invited to stay. But when we say that the question of leaving a degenerating proletarian organisation is a complicated tactical question CP and EM "dialectically" transform



this into a caricature, and imply we say "We can stay in a bourgeois organisation for tactical reasons".

#### A PROVISIONAL BILAN

The Londoners offer us nothing but a mass of (undialectical) contradictions. We are told that the correct time to split (in hindsight) was 1922, but maybe it wasn't, maybe it was 1923, maybe it's when decay is dominant; or when it's complete. Whatever it was, it must have been some time. Some "method" that castigates its opponents for failure to choose a date and then is incapable of choosing one for itself! But more nefarious is the view that it might have been right to split over a tactical issue BEFORE decay began. This is an indirect defence of the KAPD, and a persistent refusal to see that if the IL had the better attitude to organisation and the party of the two oppositions, then it is blindness not to see that they must have had the better attitude to the organisations and parties existing at that time, i.e. that there is a

firm connection between the Italian Left and the KAPD's views on the party and their views on the Communist International. Failure to realise this could lead CP and EM to a repetition of the KAPD's sectarian attitude towards revolutionary organisations today.

The two year long debate on the question of origins has been valuable; but it shows how much needs to be done in the education of the CWO historically and theoretically. Hopefully we are moving towards a situation where,

"The same gentlemen who up to now have decried (dialectics) as mysticism and incomprehensible transcendentalism, will now declare that it is indeed something quite self-evident, trivial and commonplace." (Engels, Dialectics of Nature p.68)

DGP  
September 1982



## Marxism and the Trades Union Question

### Introduction

In July 1982 the SUCM (Supporters of the Unity of Communist Militants - Iran) invited the CWO to explain its position on the trade union question. The following article is largely based on the address we gave to the SUCM. However, there are some significant changes. The debate on Marxist method, stemming from the discussion on our political origins and our re-assessment of the KAPD (Communist Workers' Party of Germany) cannot be isolated from the rest of the CWO's politics. On the contrary, implications are continually being found and

discussed within the group as we clarify our understanding of Marxism and proletarian history.

Thus, although the original address to the SUCM had concluded that the KAPD's recognition of the counter-revolutionary role of the trade unions was not accompanied by a similar recognition of the necessity for the revolutionary party to maintain a presence within the daily struggle of the working class, subsequent discussion has led us to realise also that the KAPD, no less than the IIIrd International from which it had separated itself, did not understand the reasons for the counter-revolutionary activities of the trade unions. The full implications for the class struggle of the new historical period which the 1st World War had opened up could not possibly be grasped in the revolutionary period alone. A whole period of revolutionary decline and defeat, accompanied by capitalist reconstruction and the development of state capitalism, had to be confronted in reality by revolutionaries and theoretically explained. As far as the trade unions are concerned, this meant reaching an understanding as to why the unions act against the interests of the working class in the economic struggle during a non-revolutionary period as well as against the class in the revolutionary period.

During our recent discussions we have come to realise that the CWO has unwittingly not always advanced the same reason for the trade unions' anti-working class character today. Instead of arguing consistently that the trade unions are reactionary because of their objective negotiating function in capitalism's decadent period, we have also argued that the class nature of the unions is a result of their integration into the state, and sometimes even asserted that the reason is the trade unions' bureaucratic, sectional and undemocratic structure. Whilst the first reason does in fact explain the anti-working class character of all trade unions today - whatever the subjective intention of 'left' trade union leaders - the other "reasons" are not really reasons at all; they are rather examples of some of the consequences

of maintaining a permanent existence as negotiating organisations today. Again, as we move from formal abstractions as a method of political analysis, we can recognise that both these characteristics - bureaucratic structures and integration into the capitalist state - are tendencies which are most clearly seen in the advanced capitals but whose occasional absence in reality DOES NOT INVALIDATE the basic reason for the trade unions' anti-working class nature today. That is, their role as wage negotiators in an era when lasting gains can no longer be wrested from the bourgeoisie.

Since the original address to the SUCM was presented we have witnessed one of the most blatant periods of phoney class war in history. The state of the class struggle in Britain today makes the following article more than ever a political necessity. There have been strikes by health workers, miners, railway workers, nurses and carworkers in Liverpool, Luton and at BL. The healthworkers and nurses' struggle dragged on for months, yet at no time did the workers ever look like winning even the shortest of short-term victories. The miners, normally regarded as the most powerful group of workers, have twice been reduced to confusion and recrimination in strike ballots. In the railway workers' disputes we even found that the drivers came out on strike on the very day that the NUR strike ended.

At the present time the capitalist crisis has reached a critical stage. With a real unemployment figure of over four millions, British workers in the last couple of years have been reluctant to struggle under threat of losing their jobs (the low point of this being the Hyster workers' agreement to accept wage cuts as long as management continues to invest!) Today the question is not simply about this job or that wage increase but about a united, collective response to the attacks of the system as a whole. And this is where the trade unions have played such a great part for capitalism. Token one-day stoppages are not solidarity actions to support other workers. Last September's "Day of Action" called by the TUC, for example, was intended to forestall any real action by the workers. The unions' "guerrilla" campaign in the healthworkers' strike was a campaign against the working class, dividing it up region by region and section by section and always warning the ruling class when the strike would begin and end. This is not a new union trick (it was used in the General Strike in May 1926 when only 40% of workers were ever on strike at any one time) but they are now using it more widely as well as developing other tricks. One recent manoeuvre has been the strike ballot. This has undermined two attempts by miners in Wales and Scotland to prevent pit closures. When the Scottish miners had already come out the union called a ballot in England for a strike when the English miners had begun their Christmas holidays. And last month, the NUM's strike ballot actually got miners in Yorkshire, Derbyshire and Wales back to work since they had already gone on strike. But Scargill, the so-called 'militant' hasn't become a scab overnight. In February 1981 50,000 miners (the bulk in South Wales) did strike without waiting for the union and forced the government to withdraw its plans for scrapping over 50 pits and 30,000 jobs. Scargill at that time tried to prevent Yorkshire miners from joining the strike and was duly called the scab he was by Welsh and Kent

miners when he came to NUM headquarters. The key difference between February 1981 and today is that then the workers went outside of the unions. The only other event to turn the bourgeoisie pale in the life of this government has been the 'riots' of 1981. The unemployed don't have unions to contain the struggle, to 'negotiate a settlement'. Nothing, apart from individual isolation, stands between them and the class enemy. Events like the 1981 miners' strike and the 'riots' of that summer were more dangerous to the ruling class than anything else because they had the potential for solidarity, mass action and the unification of the entire working class. The unions today stand as the greatest barrier to this. To try to explain how the unions are an anti-working class force and how to develop an effective policy against them was the purpose of our address to the SUCM.

## Trade Unions in the 19th Century

Our opposition to the trade unions is based on a materialist analysis of the historical period we are living in and its worldwide implications for reformism and organisations which attempt to win reforms for the working class today. For us, the opening up of the revolutionary era which was signalled by the 1st World War and the subsequent revolutionary wave in Europe also means that capitalism's progressive period was over. The capitalist mode of production had now entered its period of historical decline, or decadence.

This doesn't mean we think capitalism has stopped accumulating or that it has ceased to develop the productive forces since 1914. (This is a ridiculous concept for Marxists, since we know that capitalism can't exist without accumulating.) But it does mean that objectively capitalist accumulation is no longer the best possible way for developing the world's productive forces. The material basis for communism exists and a communist society would be able to develop the productive forces much more efficiently and for the benefit of humanity as a whole. More than this, communist development of the productive forces would not involve the vast destruction of machinery and plant and the terrible loss of millions of lives which capitalism's cyclical crises now involve - i.e. imperialist world wars. Whereas in the 19th century capitalism's development involved the creation of the working class - i.e. the revolutionary class whose development was an essential precondition for the overthrow of capitalism and establishment of communism, today, for every newly-created proletarian there exists a huge number of unemployed, landless peasants and other non-proletarian strata which capitalism cannot integrate into the production process. Under decadent capitalism the accumulation cycle analysed by Marx in the 19th century has been transformed into a global cycle. The old decennial crisis has been replaced by global crises which imperialist capitalism can only resolve by means of world war. In the 20th century crisis - world war - reconstruction is the pattern of capital's accumulation cycle.

One of the implications of this global cycle is that REAL reforms are no longer possible. Whereas in the 19th century workers' living standards gradually rose, despite the interruptions of the so-called 'business cycle', today rises in living standards are limited in time to a few years during the reconstruction period following world wars (the last one from



about 1950 to the mid-1960s) and limited geographically to the economically advanced countries. Moreover, the cost to the proletariat in terms of millions of lives lost as imperialist cannon-fodder hardly justifies the term 'reform'.

Now, given that capitalism can no longer concede reforms in any meaningful sense of the word, what has happened to those organisations like the trade unions which don't recognise this and still exist to negotiate the terms of wage labour and "improvements" for the working class? Quite simply, from organisations of the working class, they have been transformed into organs which act against the interests of the class. This is not because the trade unions are hierarchical or undemocratic (although this is usually the case) but by virtue of their historical function as mediators with capital. Objectively incapable of winning reforms, they have become a means of selling austerity and unemployment to the working class. They act in the interests of the national capital within the working class and in the name of the working class. Trade unions are a particularly useful weapon for the bourgeoisie because of their historical role as genuine working class organisations in the pre-decadent period.

So, our opposition to the trade unions today is not based on some eternal principle of opposition to reformism. It is based on the recognition that under decadent capitalism reformism is impossible. The CWO recognises that the trade unions were created as genuine working class organisations. Specifically they were created as a means of self-defence in what Marx called the guerrilla struggle of the working class (i.e. the day-to-day struggle). The fight for 'combinations' in the 19th century - i.e. the fight for the right of workers to combine together to defend themselves economically, helped the young proletariat to recognise itself as a class. Most of the early trade unions were confined to skilled workers - to recently proletarianised craftsmen or artisans. The very act of combining together helped them throw off their previous petty-bourgeois class outlook and led them to identify themselves as a class. Not only were trade unions one of the principal ways for the class to organise itself and gain experience of struggle, but in the 19th century they did win real reforms for the working class (e.g. 1846 the 10 hour Act; the reduction in child labour; wage rises, etc.)

One of the main forces behind the formation of the 1st International in 1864 was the British trade unions, through the London Trades Council. Although these trade unionists were relatively privileged skilled workers, part of the 'labour aristocracy', and their political affiliations were often bourgeois liberal-democratic rather than socialist, trade union leaders played an important part in the activities of the International. (For example, supporting bourgeois progressive movements like the North in the American civil war and preventing the import of scab labour from abroad during strikes). When the TUC met for the first time in 1869 the following internationalist resolution, urging its member unions to affiliate to the International, was passed,

"That as local organisations of labour have almost disappeared before organisations of a national character, so we believe the extension of the principle of

free trade, which induces between nations such competition that the interest of the workman is liable to be lost sight of and sacrificed in the fierce international race between capitalists, demands that such organisations should be still further extended and made international. And as the International Working Men's Association endeavours to consolidate and extend the interests of the toiling masses, which are everywhere identical, this Congress heartily recommends that Association to the support of the working men of the United Kingdom, especially of all organised bodies, and strongly urges them to become affiliated to that body, believing that the realisation of its principles would also conclude to a lasting peace between the nations of the earth." (Quoted by Marx in his Report to the Basle Congress, reprinted in The First International and After, Pelican pp.111-2)

In 1866 (Instructions for Delegates to the Geneva Congress) Marx clearly outlined his views of the trade unions. He recognised them as both legitimate and necessary in the "guerrilla fight between capital and labour", but went on to criticise them for not fully understanding "their power of acting against the system of wage slavery itself". He criticised them for keeping aloof from the political struggle and argued that in future the trade unions must "learn to act deliberately as organising centres of the working class in the broad interest of its complete emancipation." By this Marx meant that the trade unions should lend their support to any independent political tendency of the working class which could form the basis for the formation of an independent proletarian party. In this he was to be disappointed, at least as far as Britain was concerned. Despite their role in the 1st International, the British trade unions tended to put their political support behind the liberal bourgeoisie (Liberal Party) - for example, their support for 1867 Reform Act (where suffrage was based on household (property) qualification, not universal suffrage). Already in Britain the trade union movement was full of contradictions. On the one hand the unions had helped to initiate the International, on the other they existed to defend narrow trade interests and often maintain the privileges which skilled workers had vis-a-vis the unskilled. Economically they were winning reforms for the working class, politically they aligned with a faction of the bourgeoisie. (One member of the 1st International, Applegarth (cabinet maker) literally sold out to the Liberals when he took Home Office bribes to mobilise the working class behind the Liberals in the 1868 election.). Opposition by the trade unions to revolution, especially Marx's analysis of the Paris Commune, was one of the reasons for the collapse of the 1st International. By 1879 Engels acknowledged that the economic struggle (and therefore the trade union struggle) in Britain had not led to the creation of an independent proletarian party.

"There is in England a genuine working class movement only in so far as strikes take place. But, successful or not, strikes fail to advance the labour movement a single step. And in recent years when trade has been depressed, the capitalists have deliberately fomented strikes to have an excuse to close factories. To inflate strikes into

struggles of world significance - and this is the attitude of the London 'Freiheit' - can, in my view, only do harm. There is no point in denying that at the moment, no genuine labour movement in the continental sense exists in England." (Engels to Bernstein, June 17 1879. Quoted in Marx and Engels on Britain p.678)

## Reform or Revolution

But it wasn't just in Britain that the trade unions showed themselves unwilling to act in the broad interests of the class' complete emancipation. By the end of the 19th century a strong Social Democratic Party existed in Germany with substantial trade union support. After the repeal of Bismarck's anti-socialist laws the unions were concerned with consolidating their legal position within the bourgeois state and with the struggle for immediate economic reforms. The general success of the unions in both these fields led to the abandonment of Marxism by a large section of Social Democracy who, under the guise of "revising" Marxism, theorised away the necessity for a working class political revolution to seize state power. Within German Social Democracy Bernstein was the leading theorist of the Revisionists and it was Rosa Luxemburg who led the fight of the Marxist minority to maintain Marxism as a scientific theory of revolution. For Bernstein the growing centralisation and concentration of capitalism (monopolies, trusts, cartels, etc.) which accompanied the rise of imperialism, were a sign that capitalism was gradually socialising itself out of existence, while he portrayed the proletariat as gradually realising socialism by means of successful reformist struggle through the trade unions and parliament. But, as Luxemburg pointed out in Reform or Revolution,

"It is absolutely false and totally unhistorical to represent work for reforms as a drawn-out revolution, and revolution as a condensed series of reforms." (p.115)

Outlining the difference between the Revisionists' view of the role of unions and parliament (i.e. the reformist struggle) and the Marxist view (what Luxemburg argued was the majority Party view), Luxemburg recognised that both had in common the objective of "amelioration of the workers' condition". But, for Marxists trade union and parliamentary activity prepare the proletariat subjectively for realising socialism (i.e. experience gained in struggling against the bourgeoisie). For the Revisionists, trade union and parliamentary struggles would "gradually reduce capitalist exploitation itself, remove from capitalist society its capitalist character, and give it a socialist one." (That is, for Bernstein parliament and the unions were objectively the means for revolution.) While Bernstein, for the Revisionists, denied that capitalism was heading for collapse Luxemburg defended Marxism and argued:

"It is not true that socialism will arise automatically and under all circumstances from the daily struggle of the working class. Socialism will be the consequence only of the ever-growing contradictions of capitalist economy and the comprehen-

sion by the working class of the unavailability of the suppression of these contradictions through social transformation ... complete transformation of the ruling capitalist order ... can only be attained through seizing state power and never on the path of social reform within the confines of existing society."

While Luxemburg was involved in the struggle against Revisionism Lenin was engaged in the fight against the Economists inside Russian Social Democracy. The Economists wanted to limit Party activity to the economic, or trade union struggle and argued that the political struggle would develop automatically out of the economic struggle of the class. Like Luxemburg, Lenin replied that proletarian political consciousness (i.e. Social Democratic consciousness) won't arise spontaneously out of the daily struggle of the workers against the bosses and the government. What is to Be Done has gone down in libertarian mythology as the theorisation of the substitutionism of the party. However, the famous sentence that,

"Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers ONLY FROM WITHOUT, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers." (pp78-9)

takes on a different meaning when it is seen in its real context of the battle against Economism. All Lenin was arguing was for the need for the proletariat to have a general awareness of the role of the working class struggle historically; of its part in the emancipation of humanity as a whole, and hence of its own historical (not just immediate economic) goals. As Lenin said, such proletarian political consciousness does not spring automatically from the daily struggle in the factories over piece work, wages, or whatever. The economic struggle is taking place all the time. Workers don't want to hear just about strikes which they know take place already; they want to know about socialism. They don't want just the "thin gruel" of 'economic' politics; they want to know about all aspects of the political struggle. Contrary to the libertarian myth, he wasn't arguing that workers are innately stupid and incapable of acting politically unless "bourgeois" intellectuals led them from outside. What he was saying was that the working class as a whole needs to be conscious of its independent, revolutionary interests and that it is the task of the proletarian Party (in 1903 this meant the Social Democratic Party) to work inside the class to create this awareness and win over the working class to the Party. He pointed to the experience of the British working class whose economic struggle had reached political dimensions, but not socialist political dimensions. From What is to Be Done?, again:

"The economic struggle of the English workers, for instance, also assumed a political character without any intervention on the part of the socialists. The task of the Social democrats, however, is not exhausted by political agitation on an economic basis; their task is to convert trade unionist politics into Social Democratic political struggle, to utilise the sparks of political consciousness which the economic struggle generates among the workers, for the purpose of raising the workers to the



level of Social Democratic political consciousness." (p.72)

For Lenin, as for Marx, then, the "workers' organisations for the economic struggle should be trade union organisations" (i.e. not the Party). The task of the Social Democratic Party was to work inside them, not only to influence the economic struggle but also so that the socialist trade union members could make a "direct and conscious effort to influence their comrades". In other words, the trade unions were seen as a link between the Party and the class.

While in Russia trade unions were still not yet fully legalised, and Lenin was outlining one of the tasks of the Social Democrats as being to work for their full legalisation and for exposure of police and government unions, in the more advanced European countries unions were using their legal status to consolidate their position within the state. As the bourgeoisie recognised the trade unions' right to exist and their legal position became more secure (e.g. funds protected from embezzlement) unions gradually became more and more bureaucratised (full-time officials, etc.) and less and less inclined to use the strike weapon. In this period huge mass strikes took place in Russia (1905), Italy (1904 and 1912), Belgium (1902) outside of the unions. As capitalism moved into its decadent phase the economic struggle began to take on insurrectionary proportions as workers found mass struggle the most effective way of securing improvements in their conditions. Meanwhile, the established trade unions identified more and more with the interests of their own national bourgeoisie. As organisations with permanent paid officials, sickness funds, investments, etc., their very existence was threatened by the idea of conducting illegal opposition to war if it was declared. The trade union leaders were not prepared to risk their funds, offices and imprisonment. More and more they identified themselves with the 'national interest' - their capitulation to imperialism in 1914 was the outcome.

The trade unions' support of their 'own' national capital didn't just involve an abstract abandoning of the "right to strike", it revealed their complete bankruptcy as organisations for defending the class at an economic level. Preserving the trade union organisation intact did not mean that the hard-won gains of the previous century were preserved for the class. On the contrary, with the trade unions' co-operation the 8 hour day was abolished and replaced with the militarisation of labour (i.e. workers in war industries were regarded as a civilian army. In Britain, for example, munitions workers couldn't change jobs without a certificate from their employer; they could, however, be moved from factory to factory by the government.) Speed-ups were implemented with union agreement and even craft privileges were allowed to be withdrawn for the "war effort" when dilutees (i.e. semi-skilled, mainly female workers) were brought into the munitions works. (Not for the same pay, of course.)

For Lenin the reason for the trade unions' capitulation to imperialism was the opportunism of their leaders, their bureaucratism, and their defence of craft privileges for a labour aristocracy which he saw as having been bought off by the spoils of imperialism. In other words, he ignored the same capitulation on the part of the relatively newer unions of

semi-skilled and unskilled workers (e.g. in Britain the dockers and the gasworkers). While at a political level Lenin fought for the separation of the internationalists from the social chauvinists of the II<sup>nd</sup> International and for the formation of the III<sup>rd</sup> International, he still saw the unions as legitimate working class organisations whose leadership had gone over to the bourgeoisie, but which could be transformed into weapons of revolution. It was this conception which the Bolsheviks brought to the III<sup>rd</sup> International and which was included in the theses and resolutions adopted by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress in 1920. Thus, on the one hand the International outlined clearly the part of the trade unions during the war, e.g.

"During the long years of the war the trade unions almost everywhere provided the main base and support for the military policy of their governments. Who advanced and supported the idea of class peace? The neutral trade unions. Who taught the workers during the war that they should refrain from any revolutionary activity and even from economic strikes? Who advocated that the working day be extended, the exploitation of female and child labour be increased and rights already won in struggle be repealed? Who fanned the nationalist and chauvinist sentiments harboured by the broad masses of the population? Who conducted a cruel and merciless struggle against those who remained true to the idea of international solidarity and agitated against imperialist war? The 'socialist' and 'syndicalist' trade unions."

and went on to show the role of the unions immediately after the war:

"The same trade union leaders who promised the workers that miracles would be performed when their governments won, who declared that unity and class collaboration were temporary tactics, necessary because of the national danger, and that class struggle would resume once the war ended, these same leaders, now that peace has been made, not only fail to organise the workers in struggle, but have extended their tactics of compromise from the national to the international level." (From the III<sup>rd</sup> International to the Trade Unions of All Countries 8-8-20, in Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the III<sup>rd</sup> International pub. Ink links p.171-2)

The same Congress, however, accepted the thesis that "Though, during the war, the trade unions influenced the working masses in the interests of the bourgeoisie, they are now instruments for the destruction of capitalism". (In The Trade Union Movement, Factory Committees and the III<sup>rd</sup> International.) This thesis was part of a larger resolution on trade unions and factory committees adopted by the International on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1920, but it was not without its opponents. In particular, John Reed, for the US had asked for the debate to be conducted in English and for time to study the documents. The British and US delegates were opposed to the idea that the trade unions were revolutionary class organisations and to the idea of capturing their leaderships. Tanner, for the British delegation, Wynkoop for the Dutch, John Reed for the US, were among those who abstained from the voting.

However, the political organisation with recent experience of the trade unions' role during revolution and who also held the view that the unions couldn't be transformed into revolutionary organs - the KAPD - was absent from the debate.(1)

## The Trade Unions in the German Revolution

Unlike Russia in 1917, Germany had a sophisticated bourgeoisie which was prepared to wear any kind of democratic mask in order to quell and defeat the revolution. It wasn't just during the war that the SPD and the trade unions supported the interests of German national capital, during 1918, 1919 and 1920 they consciously fought against "Bolshevism" (i.e. against the revolution) and used their influence within the working class to destroy the revolution from within. As we said in Revolutionary Perspectives 7:

"Relying on their reputation as working class organisations as a result of their leadership of the reformist struggle before the war and on the subsequent working class support which they maintained, the SPD and the trade unions worked systematically against the revolution by opposing the power of the councils and working for the establishment of parliamentary democracy." (p.4)

In Germany the bourgeoisie literally handed over control to the SPD. Prince Max of Baden recognised that Ebert as Chancellor gave the bourgeoisie the best chance of defeating the working class. At the Kiel naval base Noske had quelled a naval mutiny by getting the sailors to put their trust in the 'socialist republic' and Prince Max told Ebert "to do in the country as a whole what Noske has done in Kiel." The policy of the bourgeoisie towards the councils was not to attack them militarily at first. This was only the last resort. Instead, the Social Democrats and trade unions undermined their potential as the organisational basis for the proletarian dictatorship by acting inside them to ensure that they didn't develop a clear independent working class character. These are some of the tactics they employed:

- 1) They invoked the principle of parity for all Social Democratic parties (SPD and USPD - Independent Social Democrats) and the trade unions on council executives.
- 2) They argued that the councils were merely interim bodies before a new parliament was elected.
- 3) They changed the number of delegates allowed by each factory so that smaller, less class-conscious factories, where the workers tended to support the Social Democrats were given a proportionally higher number of delegates.
- 4) They argued for restricting voting rights to trade union members alone.
- 5) They turned the basis for election to the councils into a universal franchise (i.e. multi-class) instead of factory committee delegates.
- 6) Sometimes (e.g. Hamburg) they demonstrated in favour of workers' councils and even for the dictatorship of the proletariat, whilst all the time working against such an outcome (e.g. by opposing the formation of a Red Guard in Hamburg, Bremen and Munich).

And when all these 'peaceful' methods failed, the trade unions fought for the 'republic' against the revolution. While Noske mustered Freikorps (right-wing mercenaries) to militarily defeat the revolution, trade unionists formed the basis of a Republican (i.e. left bourgeois) military opposition against the revolution (e.g. two SPD army corps based in Nuremberg were used in the assault on the 2nd Munich Soviet Republic which was defeated at the beginning of May 1919). Revolutionary workers often found themselves fighting their trade union "brothers".

After the defeat of the Munich Soviet the SPD Government felt in a stronger position to crush the class-wide organisations which remained in existence. They now turned their attention to the factory committees. In May 1919 a Works Council Bill was published and became law in February 1920. This outlawed any "works council" (i.e. factory committee) not controlled by the trade unions and limited their role to "collective bargaining". The ADGB (German TUC) expelled many revolutionary workers and worked hand-in-hand with management to 'discipline' the workforce - often demanding the dismissal of non-trade unionists. The bosses often insisted that workers join trade unions (Gorter used this as an illustration of the capitalist role of the trade unions in the revolution). Because of such closed-shop policies the trade unions experienced an influx of new members, but in many parts of Germany membership was still down in 1920-21 from its 1918 level (notably Hamburg).

### THE NEW 'UNIONS' (FACTORY ORGANISATIONS)

What was the response of the revolutionary workers to this attack on the factory committees and the disintegration of the councils? Basically it was to try and regroup the most class-conscious workers into what are called in English 'unions', but which are more accurately described as factory organisations. The factory organisations' main purpose wasn't to negotiate the terms of the sale of labour power, they were an attempt to keep the revolutionary core of the councils alive during the period of reflux in the revolution. They were formed on a political basis. Basically there were two main organisations, the FAUD (Free Workers Union of Germany) and the AAUD (General Workers Union of Germany). The FAUD was particularly strong in the Ruhr where it had 90,000 members in 1919 (mainly miners). It later came under the control of the syndicalists. Both were organised on a factory, not an industry basis, and grouped according to local area (i.e. an incipiently soviet basis, not a traditional syndicalist union structure). The unions had political aims. The clearest was the AAUD which took its political positions from the KAPD (Communist Workers Party of Germany), the political organisation which resulted from the split in the KPD (German Communist Party). One of its major theorists was Herman Gorter.

It's against the background of these events in Germany and the situation of a downturn in the revolution that today's revolutionaries must view Lenin's Left-Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder and Gorter's Reply to Comrade Lenin. Basically Lenin asks the question, "Should revolutionaries work in reactionary trade unions?" In concluding that:

"To refuse to work in the reactionary



trade unions means leaving the insufficiently developed or backward masses of workers under the influence of the reactionary leaders, the agents of the bourgeoisie, the labour aristocrats, or the "workers who have become completely bourgeois." (p.44)

Lenin makes two assumptions:

- a) That some trade unions at least are not reactionary. Those that are reactionary can be revolutionised if communists oust the reactionary leaders.
- b) Communists must work in all mass organs where the working class exists, otherwise the party is cutting itself off from the masses.

In reply to the first assumption, Gorter said,

"What Marx and Lenin emphasised about the state - that despite the formal democracy that it professes, its organisation makes it unsuited to serve as an instrument for proletarian revolution - applies equally to the trade union organisations. Their counter-revolutionary strength cannot be destroyed or diminished by a change in personnel, by the replacement of reactionary leaders with left-wing or revolutionary people." (p.6 of 'Oppositionist' edition)

The subsequent history of the trade unions has proven the truth of the last sentence of this quotation, and it is understandable that one of the leading theorists of the German Left should reach this conclusion, given the experience of the trade unions in the German Revolution. But even this insight doesn't take into account the full complexity of the problem in reality.

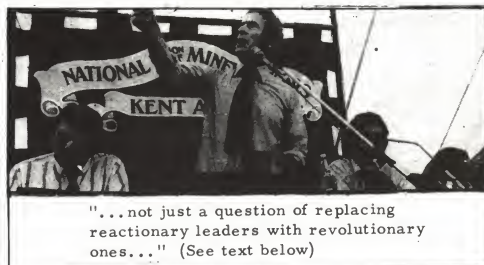
In the first place, Gorter's analysis failed to take into account that internationally the trade union movement had split into two opposed camps - those social chauvinists who supported the reactionary Amsterdam International (the Yellow trade unions); and those who supported the Communist International and who would come together in the International Council of Trade Unions established in July 1920, shortly after Gorter wrote his Reply. At its 2nd Congress the International issued an address to the trade unions of all countries calling on:

"...all workers who support social revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat to fight persistently to persuade their unions to adhere to the International Council of Trade Unions, set up on 15 July in Moscow by unions from Russia, Britain, Italy, Spain, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, France and Georgia, and to withdraw from the den of thieves known as the International Labour Organisation and from its associate, the scab IFTU.

The programme of the International Council of Trade Unions is the programme of the Communist International. (Theses, Resolutions etc. p.176)

It's true that events in Germany had shown that the trade union leaders were not averse to revolutionary declarations at the same time as pursuing a policy of sabotaging the revolution from within. However, Gorter's analysis didn't provide any explanation for the existence of the pro-communist unions. He chose to ignore them. For those revolutionaries who did not, the question of the reactionary nature of the trade unions could not have been so clear-cut in 1920.

In the second place, the reasons advanced by Gorter and the KAPD to explain why the trade unions are "unsuitable instruments for the revolution" were confused and came dangerously close to anarchism. Thus, we are told, the trade unions are undemocratic, like the bourgeois state, and for this reason they cannot be instruments for revolution. But this is simply anarchism. Marxists don't oppose the bourgeois state because it is undemocratic and hierarchical, but because it is the instrument by which the capitalist class imposes its rule over the working class. Similarly, our opposition to the trade unions today is not to their hierarchical (leaders and masses) structure as such; nor do we argue that they are "too weak for the struggle" (Gorter) because they are based on trades. Opposition to "leaders" in general reflects the fatal tendency towards anarchism which marred the whole of the German Left's thinking on political organisation, while the argument that the unions are "weak" because of their sectional trade basis only gives strength to the advocates of syndicalism.



The KAPD was born in the revolution and did not envisage the possibility of its defeat and a period of capitalist reconstruction when the proletariat would once again be on the defensive. Indeed, they overlooked the fact that even during the revolution itself the economic struggle continues - economic demands exist side by side with the political struggle. As the revolution was defeated the economic struggle came to the fore and the KAPD's factory organisations gradually took on the features of traditional trade unions as they took on more and more economic tasks. The German Left's analysis could not explain this in anything but moral terms. While Gorter was correct to argue that winning over the masses was not just a question of replacing reactionary leaders with revolutionary ones, his arguments about "leadership politics" did nothing to solve the problem of how the revolutionary minority can influence the mass of the working class; of how to win the majority of the workers away from the influence of the reactionary trade union and Social Democrat leaders.

This brings us to the second assumption of Lenin, viz that the communist party must work inside all mass organs of the working class. For the German Left, haunted by the spectre of opportunism and the reactionary policies of the German trade unions, this was anathema. Their answer was to maintain a "pure" political organisation and to refuse to work inside the traditional trade unions. What Gorter and the KAPD could never recognise is that revolutionaries do not have this choice: communists must work wherever the working class is organised on a mass basis in the workplaces. The KAPD encouraged the spontaneous tendency amongst the more conscious

workers in Germany to form factory organisations while the more backward workers who were still under the influence of the Social Democratic trade unions were abandoned by them. This was just as mistaken as the KPD which had abandoned work in the organisations which had split from the Social Democratic unions when it turned to a policy of work in the trade unions at the end of 1919.(3) The International's policy was quite clear, however. Neither the 21 conditions for admission to the International nor the theses on the trade unions and factory committees at the 2nd Congress excluded work in organisations which had split from the old trade unions. On the contrary, the International outlined a policy of work in both organisations where a split had occurred.

"Where the trade union movement has already split into an opportunist and a revolutionary wing and where, as in America, unions which have a revolutionary, though not a Communist orientation exist side by side with opportunist unions, the Communists must support the revolutionary unions, helping them to overcome their syndicalist prejudices and accept a Communist platform - the only reliable source of guidance in the complexities of the economic struggle. Where organisations have been established either inside or outside the framework of the trade unions, such as the shop stewards' committees and factory committees, which struggle against the counter-revolutionary tendencies of the trade union bureaucracy and support the spontaneous direct action of the proletariat, they should, it goes without saying, receive maximum support from the Communists. But support for revolutionary trade unions must not lead Communists to leave opportunist trade unions which are in a state of ferment and moving towards class struggle." (Theses etc. op.cit. p.109)

If the KAPD had had this as their framework - i.e. a policy of influencing the mass of the working class through leadership of the daily struggle, wherever it is taking place - their argument about the impossibility of transforming the trade unions into revolutionary organs by winning control of leadership positions might have been treated more seriously within the International. As it was the KAPD's sectarianism and abstract conception of a "pure" communist party (Gorter's word), meant that it rejected any policy of working among those workers who hadn't already broken with trade unionism and had already accepted a revolutionary platform. Moreover, the KAPD failed to argue its case in the International.

This lack of understanding of the need for the communist party to work at all levels of the class struggle to develop communist consciousness revealed the KAPD's fundamentally spontaneous conception of how a generalised revolutionary consciousness emerges. Practically this meant that the KAPD adopted an ostrich-like approach to the problem of the split in the German working class. It failed to face up to the fact that communists have to win over the majority of workers by confronting practically, as well as theoretically, the forces of reaction and opportunism which exist inside the class. Instead of trying to keep alive the factory committees and workers' councils by relating only to those organisations which had split from Social Demo-

cracy and which were prepared to accept the KAPD's platform, the KAPD should have been emphasising the need for the unification of both sections of the working class into genuine class-wide organs where the Communists would have been able to put forward practical policies for leading the class struggle forward in a revolutionary direction. Again, the International was clear about this:

"The attempt to organise factory committees composed only of those workers who already accept the need for the dictatorship of the proletariat is therefore mistaken. On the contrary, the Communist Party should organise all the workers around the issues raised by the economic crisis, and draw them into the struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat by extending and deepening the fight they all understand for workers' control over production." (op. cit. p.110)

## Factory Groups

It is only from this basis of understanding the need to work in the mass daily class struggles that a truly Marxist approach to the trades union question could develop. Although the International degenerated in the face of the isolation of the Russian Revolution and the defeat of the working class elsewhere in Europe, it was from the minority who fought its decline (what came to be known as the Italian Left) by holding firmly to the principles of the first two Congresses of the Comintern, and who were finally expelled for this in 1927, that the revolutionary Marxist tradition was kept alive.

Only slowly was the class nature of the unions clarified and a subsequent strategy adopted, but this painful process was an inevitable part of the difficult task of coming to terms with the consequences for the working class, and its revolutionary political organisations, of capitalism's decadence. And for the trade unions this meant understanding their role, both in a revolutionary and a non-revolutionary period. While the German Left had criticised the trade unions as unsuitable organs for the revolutionary struggle, the Italian Left were gradually forced to realise that the trade unions are not only unsuitable as revolutionary organisations, but they are also no longer suitable organisations for pursuing the class' immediate economic interests. The reason for this is not the bureaucracy or lack of democracy inside trade unions, it is rather the trade unions' objective function in capitalism's decadent epoch. Their role as mediators with the employers to negotiate the terms of sale of the workers' labour power in this epoch means that they must necessarily act in the interests of the bourgeoisie against the workers.

This was not immediately apparent to the Italian Left. At first it was thought that the reactionary policies pursued by the unions were merely a consequence of their Social Democratic and Stalinist leaderships. The unions were still considered to be a legitimate means of linking the party to the class - of linking up the political and the economic struggle. Even the newly-founded Pci (Partito Internazionalista Comunista) did not at first have a clear vision. In



Italy at the end of the 2nd World War all the political forces were creating their own unions on the basis of the pre-fascist period. At its 1945 Congress the PCInt discussed the problem of the new unions which were re-emerging and it concluded that these would probably remain under the influence of the capitalist political forces. The points of orientation of the PCInt (May 1945) still had not faced up to the problems posed by the unions.

"Rebuild your unions, but remember that wage increases are ephemeral and anti-working class if you lose sight of the historic problem of your complete emancipation.

You have experienced for over 20 years the stupid and tyrannical dictatorship of the fascist union bureaucracy; avoid creating another under the aegis of the three democratic parties. Either the unions will be the open training grounds of interests, ideas and methods or they will be transformed into the citadels of counter-revolution. (Prometeo 4 december 1980 p.11)

This hesitancy was only overcome in the debates with Bordiga who revived his political activity by encouraging a tendency in the PCInt (which party he never joined) which based its views on the trade unions on a simple adoption of the Comintern's tactics of twenty years previously - i.e. a policy of trying to capture the trade unions' leadership positions. Whilst the Bordigists remained trapped in outdated policies, the majority followed Pamen(4) in affirming the trade unions' objectively anti-working class nature in the imperialist epoch. At the same time, however, the PCInt faced up to the problems of

- a) The contradiction between the unions' capitalist function and their mass working class membership; and
- b) the necessity of communists to have a presence in the daily class struggle.

The strategy adopted was not an abstract slogan calling on workers to leave the trade unions (which by itself is useless and cannot distinguish communists from extreme right-wing capitalists). Instead, the PCInt adopted a policy which is consistent with their Marxist understanding of the role of the party in developing class consciousness. This policy was to set up a network of political groups in the factories and workplaces. These factory groups are composed of advanced workers - both party members and sympathisers who are linked to the communist party. Their role is political, not economic. Their task is not to negotiate the terms of sale of labour power, but to expose the reactionary policies of the trade unions and point out that the political way forward is outside of the union framework.

It was only when the CWO had begun to fully accept the validity of this strategy of forming political groups within the factories and workplaces that it could deepen its understanding of the tasks of revolutionaries in the daily class struggle as an essential part of the development of a generalised communist consciousness.

Only when we had accepted the need to give a practical lead in the class struggle, not just present general abstract slogans to the class; and that a network of communist groups inside the workplaces is the most effective

means for doing this, has the CWO been able to take its analysis forward, beyond the impasse of the KAPD's "purely" theoretical organisation which has no policy of linking up to the mass of the working class. Much work remains to be done, but the following is a brief summary of what the Factory Groups of Internationalist Communists are and are not.(5)

- 1) They are not party cells. They are open to non-members and act, where and as far as possible, openly.
- 2) They are political organisations with a platform. This is not a set of "watered down" political positions. They are concrete policies which stem from a broader theoretical analysis. We are not attempting to create alternative economic organisations.
- 3) Their function is to gain influence for the party amongst the workers during the daily struggle and to politicise this struggle. To do this we have to show a practical ability to lead the struggle forward, beyond trade union goals. It is not enough to tell workers to struggle 'autonomously'. During struggles communists must frame demands and tactics which will unify the class and lead to an independent struggle. At all times the factory groups must work to expose the trade unions. In the pre-revolutionary situation they will put forward demands for the formation of factory committees and their linking up into soviets.
- 4) Outside of specific struggles the factory groups have the task of education and propaganda within the factories and workplaces.

The validity of working in this or that area cannot be appraised merely on the basis of whether workers are trapped in an organisation which is bourgeois, since at the beginning of any process of coming to consciousness all workers are within the ideological and organisational framework of capitalism in some form or other. The criteria must be whether it is possible to raise the consciousness of workers in a particular struggle to the necessity of conducting an independent fight. Fighting against the unions is obviously part of this process, but it is not sufficient to rely on a mechanical repetition of the slogan "Leave the unions", since revolutionary consciousness isn't just a question of forms. If being trade union members allows communists access to mass assemblies, strike committees, even branch meetings (although at present the latter would be pointless in Britain) in order to denounce the manoeuvres of the unions to the majority of the workforce and in order to put forward a practical revolutionary alternative, then we will not abstain. In this fashion, and with this approach can communists act within the process which will bring about the dismantling of the unions and the capitalist system which has spawned them.

Footnotes

- 1) See Revolutionary Perspectives 18, The KAPD and the Party.
- 2) Germany, Revolution and Counter-revolution 1918-23.
- 3) One practical consequence of this reversal in policy was for the FAUD to fall under the influence of the syndicalists.
- 4) See Revolutionary Perspectives 19 The Italian Left and the Permanent Need for the Party
- 5) For a fuller explanation of the role of factory groups see Revolutionary Perspectives 16

# "The Democratic Revolution" - a Programme for the Past?

## Introduction

Lenin remarks in Two Tasks of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution that,

"Revolution undoubtedly teaches with a rapidity and thoroughness which appear incredible in peaceful periods of development."

And this rapidity of learning is nowhere more immediately obvious than in the theoretical works of the proletarian vanguard. Even in the context of the political convulsions which surround the toppling of a regime the proletariat can learn many lessons. Such appears to have been the case in Iran in February 1979 when the group Ettihad-e-Mobarezan-e-Komunist (Unity of Communist Militants, or UCM) appeared. This group, in common with most other Iranian Leftist organisations, had its roots in Maoism (which they term "populism"). The events of February 1979 in Iran when, for a few weeks, workers kicked out the old management from factories and established factory committees, led to a clearer recognition of the central role of the proletariat as the antithesis of capitalist production. From this recognition UCM abandoned Maoist-inspired ideas which call for alliances with bourgeois nationalist elements.

"Unless the working class steps into the arena of struggle as an independent class and armed with its own class ideology, the ideological domination of the liberal bourgeoisie over the revolutionary forces, and even over the

working class itself will be unavoidable."  
(The Iranian Revolution and the Role of the Proletariat p.19)

To the UCM then, the next revolution has to be a socialist one headed by the proletariat. UCM has developed further to recognise that the revolution in Russia was lost and that the revolutionary revival can only take place on an international level.

"As yet a communist international does not exist. The proletariat has not yet been able to take the first serious steps for the unification of its disordered ranks and the revival of the communist international. It has not been able to make up for the blows it received as an international movement, by the defeat in Russia." (op.cit. p.1)

But the UCM's supporters and the UCM itself have not simply followed a paper internationalism. By translating their texts into European languages they have forced the best revolutionary elements to confront their ideas. They have forced us to re-examine our assumptions and challenged any notions that any natural ideological superiority lies with the communists in the old capitalist heartlands. This has stimulated a vigorous debate via texts and letters and in the Fourth International Communist Conference.(1) Nor are the UCM comrades simply academics who wish to establish a programme in isolation from the class. As evidence of their activity in the factories in Iran we reproduce here (in SUCM translation) their leaflet for a large steel strike in Isfahan last year.

## Leaflet: To the Comrades of the Steel Factory Committee

Comrades!

What happened in the Steel Factory\* was another prideful demonstration of the resolution and will of a class which loses nothing in its struggle, but its chains of slavery. This great march and the magnificent demonstration of the steel workers in support of the building workers of Poolad-Shahr, happens at a time when many of the yesterday "revolutionaries" have deserted the field, a number of them have dissolved their organisations, a part of them have turned to collusion with the enemies and some helpless of solving the problems of struggle, have preferred to stay at home....

Perhaps for this very reason, when ten thousand steel workers were shouting in the suburb of Isfahan, "Poolad-Shahr to work, the Soviet to work!", what was reverberating among the people of Isfahan and other parts of Iran was this: behold! this is the immortal and invincible force of the revolution!

Indeed, the rejoice and jubilation which [we] saw on the bereaved face of the oppressed and deprived masses, following the publication of the news of the steel workers' movement, could not have been only due to the happiness for the deliverance of four thousand workers from dismissal and unemployment.

And who can deny your role in there. It is months since the Islamic Republic has announced, in its propaganda, the end to the work of the so-called "groups"; now if it has been compelled to show your leaflet on the television screen and to confess that it was the



communists who did not let the workers accept their say; if the Friday prayer in the summit of suppression and censorship, is compelled, in the Friday pray, to talk of an event in which the government and Hezbollah have been on the one side and the communists and condensed ranks of workers on the other side....it is because your valuable role has become evident to everyone.

The Iran-National\*\*workers for obtaining the order-form† surrendered to compromising leaders by shouting the slogan "Hezbollah is to die to get the order-form!". .... but if in the steel factory, despite the attempt of regime's agents, the workers refrained from repeating such slogans and persistently stressed on the repetition of the slogan "worker dies, he does not compromise", it is a success which has been undoubtedly the result of your hardships, and your consistent and long consciousness-raising work.

We are well aware that you understand the importance of the struggles of steel-workers and the necessity of its consistency, the role and mission of the steel factory Committee and the necessity of its maintenance and strengthening. We are aware that you have prepared yourself for a more cumbersome future and will also in future ensure the continuation of the struggle in a principled way, and will teach all communists a lesson in the fruitfulness of consistent communist work..... We wish you every success.

Give our warm greetings to the militant and heroic workers of the steel factory and Poolad-Shar; and accept our most sincere greetings.

May 1982

The Central Committee of the Unity of Communist Militants.

\*The Steel Factory in Isfahan.

\*\*A car factory in Tehran.

†Each year the Iran-National car factory used to give a certain number of order - formes to a section of workers depending on the number of years they had worked. The order - form was equivalent to the price of a Peykan automobile - the Iranian version of Hillman - many workers used to sell their order-forms in the black market at a higher price in order to keep their low living standards by the small profit they used to make. After the overthrow of the Shah's regime, as a measure to stabilize the Iranian economy, the bourgeois regime of Islamic Republic deprived workers of all their previous allowances, and so the government refused to pay out the Iran-National workers their order-forms - Ed.

Our disagreements with UCM and their supporters remain extensive, as the text which follows shows, but we are not entering the discussion just to pin labels and award medals. If communists in Europe cannot relate to groups which are beginning to break from the counter-revolution throughout the world to whom can they relate? Whatever the outcome of any particular episode, debate isn't simply an exchange of anathemas; it is an attempt to deepen our understanding of the global nature of the tasks facing communists and thus forge a programme for a world communist party. It is in this spirit that the following article was written.

## Tactics and Principles

It is the permanent task of revolutionary parties to participate in all aspects of the class struggle in order to clarify the communist programme, which in our epoch can only mean the goal of socialism. Communists therefore recognise that the working masses cannot simply be mobilised by any tactic or expedient. Though the growth of communist ranks is the surest sign of the increasing class consciousness of the working class, this growth cannot be bought at the expense of programmatic clarity. As the Rome Theses at the 1922 conference of the Italian Communist Party so precisely put it:

"It is an error to suppose that one can by expedients and manoeuvres expand the

party base amongst the masses at any time since relations between the party and the masses depend in great part on the objective conditions of the situation ... Party influence amongst the masses will grow when the situation becomes more revolutionary, provided that the party holds firm to its preconceived organisation and tactics." (Rome Theses) (2)

Too often in the history of the proletariat have we seen the capitulation of what were once proletarian organisations by tactics and recipes which followed the least conscious elements of the class, rather than provide a pole of orientation for the best elements.

In 1914 the Second International's leading mass parties, despite having supported the 1907 Stuttgart Resolution which called on them to "utilise the economic and political crisis created by the war to rouse the masses and hasten the downfall of capitalist class rule", capitulated to their own bourgeoisies and voted war credits for the imperialist war. Fear of losing the gains they had made under the capitalist peace (huge funds, free press, elections) and a belief that the war was simply an abnormality slowing down the peaceful development of capitalism into socialism, led to this shameful betrayal. Only the Zimmerwald Left, led by Lenin, realised that new conditions demanded new methods and that the imperialist war had exploded once and for all the myth of "evolutionary socialism". Lenin recognised that it was necessary for a new

minority to provide a programmatic framework of "turning the imperialist war into a civil war" - however utopian such a slogan appeared in 1914.

The Third International also collapsed as a revolutionary force by attempting to hold on to mass support at a time when the masses' revolutionary energies were exhausted. The symptom of this was the fatal call for a "united front" with the very Social Democratic parties that had betrayed the workers in 1914 and in Germany had massacred them (1919-21). Since then the hallmark of all the counter-revolutionary forces pretending to be proletarian has been the adoption of tactical "short-cuts to socialism", the most notable being the "transitional programme" of Trotskyism. The basic rationale behind this "programme" is that workers at present lack the consciousness to struggle for socialism so they should be given a set of "programmatic demands" which they will struggle for and these will, stage by stage, bring the working class to communism without the workers realising it! So much for the element of consciousness in the struggle for socialism.

At the same time, however, the tasks of communists can never be restricted to a simple paper propaganda for communism. Communists have to participate in every struggle which tendentially expresses the class contradiction between capital and labour. Their participation must be the basis for pointing out the goal of such struggles and on no account must communists avoid criticising such movements as long as they are restricted to the terrain from which capitalism can easily recuperate it. Again, the Rome Theses express this better:

"When the conditions which the CP has at its disposal for a tactical action which could be defined as direct (from the viewpoint of an assault on bourgeois power) don't exist, the Party, far from restricting its activity to a pure and simple task of propaganda and proselytism, can and must exercise its influence over events, through its relations with and pressures on other parties and political and social movements, tending to force the situation to develop favourably towards its own goals, and in a manner which hastens the moment when resolute revolutionary action will be possible."

The question that is posed by the UCM's programmatic call for a "democratic revolution" is, will it hasten "the moment when resolute revolutionary action will be possible", or is it yet another instance of an ambiguous formulation which attempts to win over the masses by an expedient rather than by developing their consciousness? As they claim that their programme is valid for other capitalistically backward or "dominated" countries, it is important to examine its central assumptions and see how valid it is as a contributive element to a future programme of a world communist party.

### The UCM's "democratic revolution"

In debates between communists there has to be a real attempt to present the opposing view as clearly and accurately as possible. With the best will in the world, this task is not so easy in regard to the UCM's view of the democratic revolution. As the CWO comrades pointed out in the debate in the Fourth International Conference (October 1982), the UCM seems to use the idea interchangeably to mean a number of different things. First of all "the democratic

revolution" is what is happening today in Iran.

"The present democratic revolution of Iran, which took shape on the basis of the economic crisis of 1976, at its first stages and through the February uprising overthrew the monarchy ..." (UCM Programme p.14)

But since the UCM conclude that "the present revolution, by virtue of its objective and subjective conditions cannot be an immediately socialist revolution" (The Content of the Victory of the Democratic Revolution in Iran p.36-7), they conclude that it is the basis of the present aims of the Iranian working class:

"... the revolution has continued and today (March 1981 - CWO) in the event of the active and conscious participation of the proletariat is going to reach new heights" (UCM Programme p.14-15)

These "new heights" will eventually, via a course of "uninterrupted revolution" lead to socialism.

"The present revolution has emerged on the basis of an economic crisis which has roots in the capitalist relations in Iran ... this crisis from the proletariat's viewpoint has for this reason no other solution but the destruction of capitalism as a whole and the establishment of socialism. (Content p.36-7, original emphasis)

This all appears very dialectical. The only solution to the present crisis of capitalism is socialism but the immediate objective and subjective conditions for socialism are lacking and therefore the "democratic revolution" is an initial stage to provide these conditions. However, the programme is extremely one-sided in its development. Plenty is written about the "democratic revolution" and it is clearly explained that this will eventually take us to a "Revolutionary Democratic Republic of Workers and Toilers of Iran" which is a sort of dual power. (Its chief features are 1) 'soviet democracy', 2) the general arming of the people and 3) the abolition of the state bureaucracy - which are exactly the same as Lenin's list to describe "The Dual Power" in an article of that name in 1917. (See Selected Works Volume 2 1977 edition p.35) ). However, there is no reference at all to the dictatorship of the proletariat (even if 'socialism' is vaguely referred to) as the political aim of the working class. This reveals two weaknesses in the UCM's Programme, the first, a prescriptive fetishism of political stages (which we deal with later) and an approach to the writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin as if they had only to be learned by rote.

An understanding of the fate of the "democratic revolution" in the past, however, shows that it was twice rejected by the proletariat as irrelevant to the real movement.

### Marx and Lenin's "democratic revolution"

The roots of the democratic revolution thesis are to be found in the German revolution of 1848 and in the Russian Revolution in 1905. The UCM put an inordinate amount of emphasis on two documents related to these struggles, The Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League (March 1850) by Marx and Engels and Lenin's Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution (1905).



The context of the March Address of 1850 was this. Marx and the Communist League had expected the German bourgeoisie to conquer power in 1848 and set up a bourgeois republic. This in its turn would be followed fairly quickly by a proletarian revolution. The capitulation of German liberalism to the Junker state of Prussia caused Marx to rethink this scenario and the March Address was the result. The 'democratic revolution' idea saw the proletariat carrying out both the bourgeoisie's tasks and its own via a permanent or uninterrupted revolution (UCM, wishing to disassociate itself from the theory of Trotsky of 'permanent revolution' prefers the latter translation). This democratic revolution was in effect seen as a situation of dual power between workers and petty bourgeoisie as a step towards proletarian dictatorship. However, this was just a fleeting episode in proletarian theory since before 1850 was over Marx and Engels had abandoned the democratic revolution and concluded that any hope of a proletarian revolution following a bourgeois revolution in 1850 was hugely over-optimistic. As Engels wrote in 1895,

"History has proved us, and all who thought like us, wrong. It has made clear that the state of economic development on the Continent at that time was not, by a long way ripe for the elimination of capitalist production; it has proved this by the economic revolution which since 1848, has seized the whole of the Continent." (Introduction to The Class Struggles in France)

Marx himself reached the conclusion that his optimism about 1848 was misplaced.

"There can be no question of a real revolution. Such a revolution is only possible at a time when two factors come into conflict: the modern productive forces and the bourgeois forms of production ... A new revolution is only possible as a result of a new crisis; but it will come, just as surely as the crisis itself. (May-October 1850 in Survey from Exile, Pelican p.131)



France 1848: the masses marching towards the Tuilleries are held at the barricade near the Chateau d'Eau

After this they developed the materialist conception of history and the economic analysis of capitalism. It should further be noted that the 'democratic revolution' was only put forward by Marx because he believed that the bourgeoisie were not ready to complete the tasks which the objective situation demanded.

The UCM, however, doesn't use the democratic revolution in this sense, since they believe that the objective situation calls for socialism (see the quotations above). For them the 'democratic revolution' is simply a desirable stage through which the Iranian proletariat must go before it can begin to struggle for socialism. This conception also separates them from Lenin.

Whereas Marx had been over-optimistic in his assessment of proletarian potential in Germany in 1850, events proved Lenin to be too pessimistic about their prospects in Russia in 1917. In common with the rest of Russian (and European) Social Democracy Lenin anticipated the coming revolution in Russia to be a bourgeois-democratic revolution because:

"In countries like Russia the working class suffers not so much from capitalism as from insufficient development of capitalism." (Two Tactics p.44)

However, Lenin saw in the 1905 Revolution that,

"Revolution undoubtedly teaches with a rapidity and thoroughness which appear incredible in peaceful periods of political development" (p.7)

so that,

"it is impermissible to confine ourselves to old stereotyped formulas ..." (p.23)

This led him to conclude that though the revolution in Russia would be bourgeois-democratic, given the weakness of the bourgeoisie, the proletariat must aim:

"not to allow the leadership of the revolution to be assumed by the bourgeoisie but on the contrary, to take a most energetic part in it, to fight most resolutely for consistent proletarian democracy..." (op.cit. p.46)

Lenin in this respect was trying to come to terms with the uneven development of Russia where ten million workers were exploited by international capital in huge enterprises but where a semi-feudal obscurantist regime still held political power. The abasement of the liberal bourgeoisie before the Tsar's October promises of 1905, and the Menshevik abasement before this liberal capitulation forced Lenin to consider that the proletariat, via a "revolutionary dictatorship of workers and poor peasants" would have to carry out the tasks of the bourgeoisie. In this manner he was years ahead of the Mensheviks who dismissed him as a utopian anarchist. Lenin himself called "that windbag Trotsky" a semi-anarchist for suggesting that "permanent revolution" at this time would lead directly to socialism. Lenin retorted that,

"... only the most naive optimists can forget how little as yet the masses of the workers are informed about the aims of socialism..." (op.cit. p.21)

This last statement is really what the UCM has seized upon, but it should be noted that though Russia in 1905 and Iran in 1979 bear some superficial resemblance, Lenin like Marx, advocated the "democratic revolution" idea in a situation where the bourgeois not the proletarian revolution was thought to be on the agenda. Pessimism about the chances of a proletarian revolution was still with Lenin in 1915 when he again criticised Trotsky's view that

"we are living in the era of imperialism ... and imperialism does not contrapose the bourgeois nation to the old regime, but the proletariat to the bourgeois nation." (The Two Lines in Our Revolution Collected Works Volume 21 p.419)

include in this category the UCM to whose arguments for reviving the democratic revolution idea we again turn.

## The "democratic revolution" – an obsolete programme

Accepting this would of course mean accepting that Russia faced an immediate socialist revolution. However, although Lenin rejected this his internationalist perspective allowed him to foresee that the overthrow of Tsarism could "bring about the socialist revolution in alliance with the proletarians of Europe" (p.420). Lenin's complete abandonment of the idea of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry came in April 1917, immediately after the overthrow of the Tsar. In his April Theses and Letters on Tactics he advocated the abandonment of the old position.

"Our theory is not a dogma but a guide to action. Marx and Engels always said, rightly ridiculing the mere memorising and repetition of "formulas", that at best we are capable only of marking out our general tasks which are necessarily modifiable by the concrete economic and political conditions of each particular period of the historical process. ... the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia is completed ... The Bolshevik slogans and ideas on the whole have been confirmed by history, but concretely things have worked out differently: they are more original, more peculiar, more variegated than anyone could have expected.

To ignore or overlook this fact would mean taking after those "old Bolsheviks" who more than once have played so regrettable a role in the history of our Party by reiterating formulas senselessly learned by rote instead of studying the specific features of the new and living reality. ...

The person who now speaks of a "revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry" is behind the times, consequently he has in effect gone over to the petty bourgeoisie against the proletarian class struggle ...

The formula is obsolete. It is no good at all. It is dead. And it is no use trying to revive it. (April Theses pp 14-21)

Lenin repeats all these ideas several times. He had to since a strong opposition amongst 'old' Bolsheviks led by Kamenev meant the April Theses to replace the old Bolshevik programme were rejected by 13 votes to 2. Eventually, however, the Bolsheviks ceased to support the Provisional Government and began the preparation for Soviet power. In July 1917 Lenin could conclude that,

"Too often has it happened that when history has taken a sharp turn, even progressive parties have for some time been unable to adapt themselves to the new situation and have repeated slogans which had formerly been correct but now lost all meaning - lost it as "suddenly" as the sharp turn in history was "sudden". (On Slogans, Collected Works Vol.25 p.183)

Lenin included in these progressive parties the Bolshevik Party itself which had clung to the old meaningless democratic revolution slogan until new conditions, and the necessity of new tactics became obvious. Perhaps we should also

From the foregoing exposition it can be seen that the "democratic revolution" programme has been twice found to have no relation to reality. In 1850, due to the lack of development of the productive forces, it was rendered premature and academic. In 1917 in Russia the productive forces were not only adequately developed but so too was the level of proletarian class consciousness which, in the context of an imperialist war, drove straight on to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat only eight months after the fall of the Tsar. However, if we can see why Marx and Lenin could conceive of such a tactic because of the insufficient development of the forces of production which forced them to consider the possibility of the proletariat in power but not able to proceed directly to a socialist revolution, this was in a different historical period.

The imperialist war, and the Revolution in Russia, clarified the point that imperialism was the final stage of capitalism, that in the words of the Third International "A new epoch is born" and that now history had entered the era of capitalist decadence, "the epoch of proletarian revolution". Up to a point the UCM seem to understand this too. They argue that today "the crisis of bourgeois society finds its revolutionary answer in socialism". However, this raises the question as to why they offer us a programme which sets out the preconditions for the struggle for socialism, not a socialist programme in itself. Reading it one is reminded of Lenin's criticism of the social-chauvinist Potresov in 1915 when he wrote:

"Potresov drags modern democracy backward not in "a certain sense" but in all senses; he drags it back to the slogans and ideology of the old bourgeois democracy, to the dependence of the masses upon the bourgeoisie. Marx's method consists, first of all, in taking stock of the objective meaning of a historic process at a certain given moment, in given, concrete surroundings; this is done in order, first of all, to realise which class, through its movement, is the mainspring of a possible progress in those concrete surroundings." (Under a Stolen Flag Coll. Works 1930 ed. Vol.18 p.123)

UCM are not dragging us back to the slogans of the old bourgeois democracy but to an already twice abandoned outmoded programme of the workers' movement, and in so doing they are contradicting themselves. On the one hand, they claim that the next revolution must be socialist (albeit it "not immediately") but the vanguard of the proletariat cannot have a socialist programme since the class consciousness of the workers will not allow it! It is precisely the most fundamental task to organise the proletariat as a revolutionary class in its class party - the major expression of its consciousness of the goal of socialism. Socialism will never be immediate so long as socialist vanguard hides its real goal and real programme under the guise of a semi-bourgeois, semi-stage, such as the "democratic revolution". It may indeed appear utopian to talk of socialism today in Iran but unless this is done by socialists it will always remain so. It may be easier to acquire followers if we say "demo-



cratic revolution" when socialism is our goal but if the leaders are saying they are going one place when they really mean another then the movement is going nowhere. Lenin also had a retort for those who wanted to be "realistic",

"We do not close our eyes to the difficulties of this task, but will work at it steadfastly and persistently, undeterred by the objections that this is a matter of the "vague and distant future". Yes, gentlemen, we stand for future and not only past forms of the movement."  
(Revolutionary Adventurism, Progress pubs. p.15)

A second weakness of the UCM's programme is a most unmarxist tendency to talk of creating objective conditions, as for example in the following:

"Leninism is geared to the practice of the material process of transforming a democratic revolution into a socialist revolution, and at every juncture with complete precision strives to provide the material factors (objective and subjective) which are necessary for the continuation of this process." (Letter to the PCInter by SUCM, 6-12-82)

This is indeed a strange form of marxist materialism! As Lenin said, Marx's method consists ... in taking stock of the movement, not in creating(!) the objective historic process. Unfortunately it is symptomatic of the UCM's whole approach - a lack of emphasis on consciousness and the part the communist party plays in its development and an excessive schematic approach which exaggerates the "precision" with which objective conditions can be created. This is actually a product of an inadequate understanding of what Lenin is saying in Two Tasks of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution. When he refers to the objective conditions he is referring to what exists at any one moment, not what can be created by the correct formula. In fact it turns Leninism on its head. Lenin sought slogans to fit objective conditions, UCM "creates" objective conditions to fit the slogans. In so doing they are led to demand what all strands of the bourgeoisie are demanding in Iran. Even though the latter might never be able to realise this "democracy" the UCM, by using similar slogans doesn't help to create a consciousness of any independent proletariat alternative.

In fact, like Potresov the UCM seem to be "taking us backwards" on the question of the programme. Central to the process by which the UCM conceives the unfolding of the "democratic revolution" is the division of the programme into two parts - the minimum and the maximum. Immediately this will arouse the suspicions of European communists who will see it as the same as, for example, the Erfurt Programme of German Social Democracy (1890). Whilst a minimum programme was progressive for workers in the 19th century in that capitalism was still in its ascendant period and therefore the maximum programme was something for the future, today only the maximum programme (i.e. the immediate struggle for socialism) is practical and progressive in the face of a decaying social system which can no longer offer significant and lasting reforms. The UCM are aware of all this, however, and have insisted that the "minimum demands" are not made of the bourgeoisie but they are organising demands for the workers whose consciousness is not yet sufficiently developed for communist struggle.

They also insist that the maximum and minimum parts of their programme are inseparable and therefore they are not Social Democrats who hide reformists in their ranks. However, the UCM's formulation of the problem is no better than those latter-day Social Democrats - the Trotskyists, whose programme of 1938, like the UCM's also links a minimum to a maximum programme through a series of 'stages' leading to the dictatorship of the proletariat. Here, for example, is a summary of Trotsky's Transitional Programme by a leading Trotskyist:

"The Transitional Programme is, at one and the same time, a programme for organising the workers in the struggle to win power and a programme to be put into operation immediately after the workers take power. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, when capitalism was in its ascendancy, the socialist parties had a two-part programme: the maximum programme, which expressed the demand for a socialist society in some vague future period; and the minimum programme of immediate demands, a programme of reforms that did not pose the question of the conquest of power. As early as its 3rd Congress, the Communist International had put forward the idea of a transitional programme: 'Instead of the minimum programme ... the Communist International struggles for the concrete needs of the proletariat, for a set of demands which .. constitute the stages of the struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat; each of these demands expresses an urgent need of the broad masses, even if these masses do not as yet consciously stand for the dictatorship of the proletariat.' "  
(Pierre Frank The Fourth International p.60-1)

The strategy of the transitional programme is similar to the "uninterrupted revolution" idea of the UCM. Since the masses lack the consciousness (and in the case of the UCM, the objective framework for struggle) for socialism they must struggle for something else, but eventually that struggle will bring them to socialism. There is a clear distinction here between the opportunism and manipulation of Trotskyism and the positions of communists. Communists too get involved in the daily class struggle. By enshrining in a programme a specific set of demands the danger is that the "minimum" demands, the struggle for the democratic revolution, dominate the agitational work of the communists and the "maximum", communist part is lost. Indeed, who is fighting for the subjective consciousness of communism today if not the communists? A programme pivoted on the democratic revolution, or the transitional programme, or any intermediate 'stage' to communism, is bound to neglect this fundamental task. Communists in this epoch can only have a communist programme.

If we look at the content of this "minimum programme" we find a list of demands such as the 40 hour week (the bourgeois TUC is calling for a 35 hour week!); a month's paid holiday; minimum wage levels; safety regulations; retirement at 50, etc. (See the UCM Programme pp.20-23) Some even sound downright retrogressive, such as "The prohibition of female labour in branches that are physically injurious to women". This simply accepts the capitalist division of the working class (not to say an antiquated pre-industrial conception of physically hard labour). More seriously, the UCM might reply that these reforms don't

exist in Iran but since the programme nowhere treats of the issue of communism it is legitimate to criticise it as a sort of Gotha Programme of the 20th Century.

"... the programme does not deal ... with the nature of the future state of communist society.

Its political demands contain nothing beyond the democratic litany familiar to all ... They are a mere echo of the bourgeois People's Party ... They are all demands which, in so far as they are not exaggerated in fantastic presentation have already been realised". (Marx Critique of The Gotha Programme p.28)

Now UCM might argue that these demands have meaning in Iran since they have not yet been realised there. But the fact is that they are totally unrealisable in this epoch outside of the dictatorship of the proletariat. However, since the UCM Programme hasn't the clarity to mention this it sows the belief that a democratic republic (however "revolutionary") is the finally discovered form of proletarian emancipation.

Thus, to summarise, the programmatic 'discovery' of the UCM is neither new nor relevant. It has been abandoned twice already by the working class and its central assumptions come dangerously close to those of modern Trotskyism. It is inadequate as a programmatic base for the proletarian movement of Iran and it scarcely forms a starting point for a programme for a future international communist party.

## Towards a programme for the world proletariat

Now, however, we owe it to the UCM whose supporters have opened up this debate by translating their major programmatic works into European languages, to offer some suggestions as to a framework for a future international communist programme.

As the CWO has argued elsewhere, the single unifying threat that hangs over the entire world proletariat is that of imperialist war. From Southern Africa to Somalia, from the Shatt-al-Arab to Central America, imperialist proxy wars and wars framed by imperialist rivalries are daily devouring the lives of workers and toilers. What these workers face today the entire world proletariat faces tomorrow. At no time before in history have the alternatives posed in the Communist Manifesto: "either a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large or the common ruin of the contending classes" seemed more appropriate. Revolution or war is the alternative which decadent capitalism offers the world proletariat. The capitalist crisis is today truly international, the imperialist war is truly global and the only international antithesis to the capitalist solution to the problems of accumulation is the proletariat. The question of war and militarism is therefore central to any programme which hopes to internationally link the world working class. It was of course in such a context that Lenin's idea of the democratic revolution was abandoned as a programme for Russia in favour of revolutionary defeatism as the basis for the struggle of the proletariat for an international communist revolution.

Revolutionary defeatism is not, as SUCM comrades seem to believe, synonymous with a demand for immediate insurrection. When Lenin

put forward the slogan "turn the imperialist war into a civil war" in 1915 he did not expect it to be taken immediately by the European working class. It was, as he later wrote, a slogan of orientation. This was because,

"The appalling miseries of the masses created by the war cannot fail to produce revolutionary sentiments and movements. The civil war slogan must serve to co-ordinate and direct these movements." (Under a False Flag Coll. Works Vol. 18 1930 p.147)

For Lenin,

"The conversion of the present imperialist war into a civil war is the only correct proletarian slogan ...

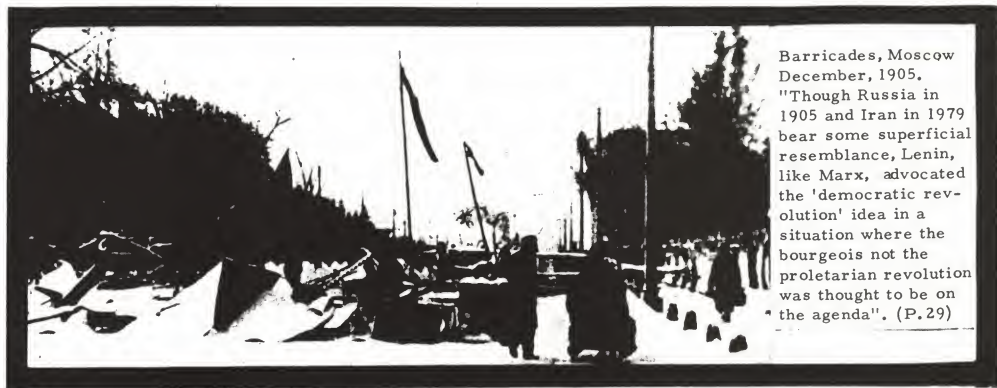
However difficult that transformation may seem at any given time, socialists will never relinquish systematic, persistent and undeviating preparatory work in this direction now that war has become a fact." (Vol.21 Collected Works p.34, 1966 edition.)

However, this doesn't mean that communists simply parrot the slogan of civil war and wait for the proletariat to catch on to it. A revolutionary defeatist struggle begins today, in the daily class struggle - where it is the task of communists to fight alongside the workers against austerity, unemployment and all the other evils that capitalist society heaps on them as its preparation for war; at the same time pointing out that the capitalist crisis only has one solution. This might not win immediate converts but it is the only way in which a class conscious minority will develop inside the factories. Revolutionary defeatism for us in the Falklands conflict did not mean calling on workers to overthrow the capitalist state, nor did it mean that we supported Argentina, as many Trotskyists did, or that we called for pacifist slogans like the SWP and the Labour Left. It meant that we took as our standpoint the Leninist idea that in an imperialist war one cannot help wishing the defeat of "one's own" government. In practical terms this meant leafletting workers telling them not to accept speed-ups and overtime for the war.

The Iran/Iraq war, over which we have criticised the SUCM, is a different case again. Here the proletariat had recently been involved in a wave of strikes against capitalism (1979-80) and, though its activity has diminished, the outbreak of the war gave communists in the region an opportunity to link their opposition to the draconian regime in Iran with the worsening living conditions of the workers and their suffering and privations as a result of the war. This seems all the more necessary as workers have been striking and deserting (albeit in isolated pockets).

However, the UCM has largely seen the war as an annoying irrelevance. They have carried out the elementary communist task of denouncing the social chauvinists (See, for example, the pamphlet Razmandegan Under the Banner of Kar 59) but have not linked the struggle for better living conditions to what they themselves recognise as an imperialist war. At the root of this indifference is their rigid adherence to the "democratic revolution". As we saw earlier, the UCM conception depends on the recognition that a democratic revolution is going on in Iran today and that each part of its gains should be defended. This means that instead of sending out a clear revolutionary defeatist message UCM were forced to conclude





Barricades, Moscow  
December, 1905.  
"Though Russia in  
1905 and Iran in 1979  
bear some superficial  
resemblance, Lenin,  
like Marx, advocated  
the 'democratic rev-  
olution' idea in a  
situation where the  
bourgeois not the  
proletarian revolution  
was thought to be on  
the agenda". (P.29)

that the sole reason for the war was the "Iraqi invasion" inspired by the needs of US imperialism to destroy the 'gains' of the February "uprising". To talk in terms of an "invasion" of one country is to make enormous concessions to one's own bourgeoisie and is immediately a step away from proletarian internationalism. Though we do not agree that the proletariat has gained anything from the bourgeoisie, even if we did we could not follow the UCM line. We urge the comrades to study the exchanges between Kamenev and Lenin in 1917. It is extremely instructive to find that Kamenev was the last to abandon the idea of the democratic revolution and the first to conclude that the overthrow of the Tsar meant that the proletariat could now defend the Russian state. "The war will go on because the German Army has not followed the example of the Russian Army" he wrote in Pravda. Lenin's position was clear. Not only did he abandon the democratic revolution theory which had been devised for Russian backwardness, but he criticised those who called for support for the war now that the revolution had occurred. He also criticised those who made a fetish of Russia's new-found freedoms. Instead he called for the establishment of Soviet Power - the precondition for the dictatorship of the proletariat. Now he placed revolutionary defeatism and the spread of international revolution at the centre of his thinking. Gone was the nationalist perspective which sought a means of allowing the Russian workers to "catch up" with more advanced workers. Instead he was now looking to an international revolution to save Soviet democracy from being overwhelmed by the Russian petty bourgeoisie and international capital.

Lenin never called for the "defence" of this or that set of objective conditions (even if he had demanded them at an earlier epoch); he always stretched the limitations of the existing situation to the full with the aim of transcending them. "Defending the gains" has always been the hallmark of reformists in Europe and in a war situation leads to the defence of a national capital. (See for example Trotsky's article The USSR in War (1939) where he talks of "defending former conquests" as one of his reasons for not abandoning Russia as a proletarian state.) In this era the only defensible gain is the establishment of workers' power.

UCM have taken great steps to break out of the counter-revolutionary incubus which has weighed heavily on the entire world proletariat since the October Revolution failed to become inter-

national. They have come to a critique of non-class "populist" conceptions of socialism which have their roots in Maoism. This article, brief though it is, shows the areas in which they have not yet completed their development. Mere polemical exchange however, won't change opinions as much as events. Already events in Iran have shown that as a process "the democratic revolution" is non-existent. After arguing for some time to the contrary, the UCM now seems to accept this. We hope and believe that they have the courage and integrity to do what Lenin did in April 1917 and abandon the programme when it had been short-circuited by events.

#### Footnotes

(1) See Workers Voice Nos. 6, 7, 9, 10. The Class Struggle in Iran; Iran, Communists Fight Back; Iran-Iraq War: A Jihad for Capitalism; and Meeting on the Iran-Iraq War respectively.

(2) To be translated and published for the first time in English in Revolutionary Perspectives 21.

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# On the Supposed Bordigism of the C.W.O.



AMADEO  
BORDIGA

When a group finds itself in political and organisational difficulties its capacity for open and honest debate diminishes accordingly. At no time has this been more true of the International Communist Current than since its 1981 splits. (1) Since these splits the ICC has extended its well-known capacity for political invective beyond the boundaries of polemical misrepresentation to conscious lies. In Britain the chief target has been the CWO's well-documented move towards the politics of the Italian Left, particularly that of the Internationalist Communist Party (P.C.Int.). Since the ICC (when it suits it) also claims to be in the Italian Left tradition, instead of welcoming the move, they have preferred to denounce the CWO's positions as "Bordigist". There is an enormous amount of ignorance about Bordiga and Bordigism in this country and thus a real need for a deep, scientific evaluation of its contribution and limitations, but that is beyond the scope of the present article. Our aim here is to outline the differences between ourselves and the Bordigists, and at the same time to show how the ICC has recently declined from being an honest opponent into a falsifier of history. One of the best ways to do this is to contrast their most recent International Review (issue 32) with their own, earlier, pamphlet "La Gauche Communiste d'Italie" (2)

## P.C. Int. and the ICP

The nature of Bordigism has aroused even more interest in the revolutionary milieu since the recent splits in the Bordigist International Communist Party (ICP) (3). The essence of modern Bordigism is that it claims to have formed a "sure hard party" which has held to a "complete and invariant programme" since 1848 and the days of the "Communist Manifesto". For them the proletarian experiences of the Paris Commune and Russia in 1917 have taught the working class nothing since Marx had seen it all in advance (despite what Marx, Engels and Lenin said about their mistakes - see the article on the "democratic revolution" in this issue). Because the Bordigists have never been able to grasp the dialectical nature of the relationship between party and class, between the growth of class consciousness and the growth of the party all they present us with is a "caricature of the party". For the Bordigists the party is the class and one can only speak of soviets as outgrowths of the party, not as they really are, the emanations of a wider class struggle. Furthermore, for the ICP, the only parts of recent history which matter are those which include Bordiga himself. Thus the ICP ignores the long fight the Italian Left made in clarifying the lessons of the failure of the Russian Revolution in the period between 1928 and 1945 when Bordiga had retired from political activity. In fact the Bordigists aren't even all that enthusiastic about supporting Bordiga's fight against the degeneration of the Comintern and seem now to regard it as a rather embarrassing episode. They now say that the Comintern was correct on many issues and the positions of the Italian Left exhibited some "weaknesses".

It was in defence of these "weaknesses" by the majority of the Internationalist Communist Party (P.C.Int.) that the Bordigists found their reasons for splitting from it in 1952. The basic reasons for the split were four. The first was the question of the party which we dealt with above. The second was the union question. For the P.C.Int. unions were (and are) "indispensable to the maintenance of imperialist domination" and there was thus no point in trying to capture them. They advocated instead factory groups of internationalists to fight within the daily struggle of the working class in an attempt to link the economic and political aspects of the class struggle. The Bordigists could see no further than attempting to capture the leadership of these unions. The third issue was the national question where the P.C.Int. argued that:

"Rosa (Luxemburg) was right against Lenin when she said that the epoch of national liberation struggles finished with the constitution of the great European states and that in the decadent phase of capitalism, all wars have an imperialist character."  
(Prometeo (clandestine) Nov. 1st 1943)

whilst the Bordigists took the Menshevik position that in capitalistically less developed countries such bourgeois revolutions were still possible and progressive. This ultimately degenerated into support for the PLO and was the cause of the 1982 splits in the ICP. In addition, although not having a very clear position themselves the Bordigists denied the P.C.Int. view that Russia was state capitalist and imperialist. (4)

All this the ICC knows and, as far as the ICP is concerned, often points out. However when the ICC looks at how the ICP was actually formed it suffers from selective amnesia. Previously, in their French pamphlet on the Italian Left the ICC used the word "Bordigist" in two senses, both of which appear to have a certain legitimacy. Originally the whole Italian Left - i.e. the left-wing of the PCI who fought against the degeneration of the Comintern and were finally expelled in 1927 were called 'Bordigist'. The various currents of the Italian Left in the thirties were also labelled 'Bordigist'. But this sense is entirely different from the use we have today - i.e. to refer to the ICP and other groups which have split from it since 1952. Formerly the ICC recognised this, but recently it has tried to obscure this distinction. In the cited pamphlet they begin to talk of "the really Bordigist tendency" after the 1952 split and thus use it in its modern sense. But such distinctions now don't seem to interest the ICC. Whilst their pamphlet on the Italian Left accurately tells that:

"Today only the P.C.Int. "Battaglia Comunista", which claims descent from the Internationalist Communist Party founded by Damen in 1943, of all the



present-day groups of the Italian Left claims descent from Bilan." (op. cit. p.IV)

and that:

"In 1952, the Damen tendency which had formed the P.C.Int., after several years of divergences with Bordiga, who never even joined the Party, split from the purely Bordigist tendency." (loc. cit.)

Today the ICC's International Review 32 flatly contradicts this and declares that the ICP (i.e. the "really Bordigist tendency") was formed in 1943 and that Damen then split to form the P.C.Int.:

"...the ICP, being formed in Italy in 1943, flirted with the partisans and made appeals for a united class front with the Stalinist CP..." (op. cit. p.11).

until:

"...the Damen tendency split from the Party in 1952, taking the majority of the members, and the newspaper Battaglia Comunista and the publication Prometeo." (op. cit. p.12)

Leaving aside the slanders about "flirting" with the partisans and the Stalinists for the moment, it may seem an academic point to say that the ICP split from the P.C.Int. and not vice-versa, but the ICC have a purpose in mind. It's not easy to slander a group as "Bordigist" if for six years it fought systematically against the tendency led by Bordiga. Yet the ICC has to falsify this little piece of history if all its slanders are to hold together. Indeed if the P.C.Int. is not Bordigist then the question arises as to why the ICC carries out a campaign of systematic sectarian slander as in the following gem from IR 32:

"After the split Bordiga's party became the ICP. Many of the ex-members of the fraction left with Damen and the programme of Battaglia Comunista (P.C.Int.) in 1952 contained certain important positions of Bilan on the national question, the union question, on Russia. Unfortunately the thirty years which separate us from the beginnings of Battaglia saw this group get caught up in a process of sclerosis. This can be easily seen by reading its press today and comparing it to the Platform of 1952." (op. cit. p.14)

Just what does this mean? Are the ICC suggesting that the P.C.Int doesn't defend its own Platform? Or are they suggesting that their platform says the same as their paper after thirty years and this consistency is a bad thing? All we can say is that a reading of any of the texts the CWI has published in Workers Voice or Revolutionary Perspectives translated from Battaglia Comunista will reveal the living contribution which the P.C.Int continues to make to the class struggle. And if 'sclerosis' is meant to suggest that the P.C.Int is incapable of developing then the ICC has got to explain why it was able to call the International Conferences in 1975 or why it has developed its positions on important questions (e.g. unions) or why it retains a greater presence in the working class than any of the other participants in the international conference milieu. If the

ICC is sincere in wanting a "public debate" then it has to do more than fire unsubstantiated insults; it has to explain its real positions and make a critique of the real positions of other groups.

## The Communist Left 1943-1967

A review of the ICC's history doesn't lead us to be too optimistic on the score of its sincerity. When the P.C.Int. was formed in 1943 the ICC's ancestors refused to join, not simply because they felt the theoretical basis of the new party was shaky, but also because as IR 32 tells us, they held a totally different perspective at that time. They believed that war was about to break out at that time and thus they concluded that there was no point in doing anything:

"WHEN CAPITALISM 'FINISHES' AN IMPERIALIST WORLD WAR WHICH HAS LASTED SIX YEARS WITHOUT ANY REVOLUTIONARY FLARE-UPS, THIS MEANS THE DEFEAT OF THE PROLETARIAT... The course is open towards the third imperialist war. It is time to stop playing the ostrich, seeking consolation in a refusal to see the danger. Under present conditions we can see no force capable of stopping or modifying this course." (Internationalisme 1946 op. cit p.25)

And so they buried their heads in the sand in South America, re-emerging twenty years later to tell the workers that they hadn't been defeated after all, and revolution not war was after all on the agenda. The ICC now assured everyone that it was now O.K. for us to start building the party. At first their own efforts did quite well as they attracted councilist remnants in several countries (each "conversion" being greeted with loud "salutes" to this or that groupuscule) but after a while the momentum slowed down and culminated in the splits of 1981. These splits are more than a passing embarrassment for the ICC, since they call into question their whole perspective. How do they explain why thousands of workers joined the P.C.Int in a period of "defeat" whilst in a period of "rising class struggle" the whole revolutionary milieu in Europe numbers only a few hundred "revolutionaries"? Perspectives, of which the ICC claim to be the inventors, aren't much good if in 1946 it led you to abandon the class struggle, or which, like today could disarm the class in the face of imperialist war.

Meanwhile the P.C.Int., not fetishising the existence or non-existence of the party, was continuing to fight and defend the principles elaborated by the Communist Left in the factories of Italy throughout the Fifties and Sixties. After realising that the brief wave of working class struggle at the end of World War Two was over, they concluded that the period that was opening up could lead to either war or revolution. In either event they saw it as their task to organise within the working class. This was not simply on an activist basis but led to important theoretical gains. Attempts at debates with groups which initially appeared to be breaking with leftism (e.g. Socialisme ou Barbarie, News and Letters) were also carried out. Rosa Luxemburg's Russian Revolution was published for the first time in Italian, and on the death of Bordiga, a critique of his work was written by Onorato Damen.<sup>(5)</sup> Even the ICC recognise in the pamphlet on the Italian Left that the P.C.Int was formed on a specifically anti-Bordigist basis with positions which, despite being elaborated thirty

years ago, the ICC also defends:

"In 1952 it seemed that a majority had followed Damen who rejected all hope of conquering the unions, all aid to 'coloured peoples' (according to Bordiga's terminology). He considered the C.P.'s neither as 'opportunist', nor 'centrist', but as bourgeois. He didn't accept a substitutionist view of the party. The Communist Party must not take power in order to exercise it in the name of the proletariat because 'it doesn't delegate to others its historic mission, nor hand over a general power of attorney, not even to its political party.'" (Theses of the Damen Tendency at the 1952 Congress of the P.C.Int.) op. cit. p180)

And the P.C.Int. has never degenerated into opportunism because its Platform, echoing the Rome Theses of 1922, recognises that whilst:

"The activity of the Party cannot and must not limit itself to the conservation of the purity of theoretical principles... at the same time it does not aim at 'the achievement at all costs of immediate and numerical successes. The Party is a product of and an active factor in the class struggle.'" (Platform of the P.C.Int. (1952) p.16)

So whilst the Bordigist were splitting into ever-more invariant fractions and adopting more and more opportunist policies (especially on the national question and towards Trotskyism), the P.C.Int. continued to defend and elaborate the fundamental gains of the workers' movement. Oddly, for a supposedly sclerotic group, it did not spawn any splits which gave rise to new groups, despite the fact that it worked through a period of low class struggle.

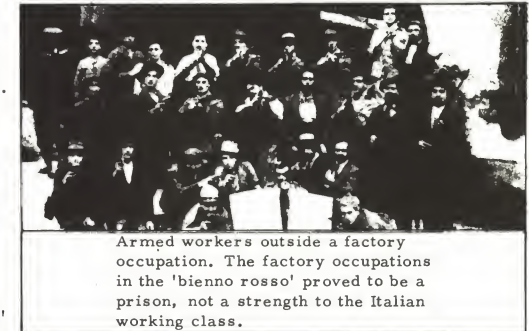
### On the Correction of Errors

All this, of course, raises the question of why the founders of the ICC have persisted in a negative, and now sectarian attitude to the P.C.Int. It can't be that the P.C.Int., unlike the ICP, claims to be the Party. The international work it has undertaken has always been oriented to the formation of a "future Party". The ICC has in the past attacked groups who seem more interested in their patch of theory than in serious work towards regroupment (unfortunately they have generally preferred to look at these failings from a psychological rather than a political angle) yet in their relations with the P.C.Int. we can see a similar sectarianism. Before 1975 the ICC never mentioned the P.C.Int. and claimed it was the ideological heir of the Italian Left. However, since the P.C.Int. started the International Conferences the ICC has published very little from Bilan. This is partly because Bilan wasn't a homogenous tradition (as recent articles in Prometeo show) and the ICC has always been very selective in its treatment of the Communist Left tradition. Such eclecticism leads the ICC to look at problems in the abstract and pose fine-sounding but often meaningless prescriptions (e.g. the call to workers to "struggle autonomously"). By confronting the mistakes revolutionaries made in real situations and identifying with the entire Italian Left (whatever its errors) the ICC would get nearer to understanding a real role for revolutionaries in the class struggle.

The attitude the ICC adopts to parts of the Italian Left (i.e. to ignore them) is rather similar to their attitude to

their own errors. But the ICP's fate shows what happens to those that fail to tackle their mistakes. This does not stop the ICC from gloating over a year after our admission that the CWO had made a "self-confessed gaffe" over a headline in Workers Voice 4. The ICC however is not immune to error. Need we remind the comrades of their errors in supporting the IRA hunger strike march, the bazaar in Kabul against the Red Army, the CGT march to defuse the steel strike in Paris during the 1980 French steel strike or even their support for "rank and filism" in an early edition of their pamphlet "Unions and wildcats"? Everyone makes mistakes but only the ICC never admits them.

Here again the P.C.Int. reveal how far they are from Bordigism since they have a critical attitude to their own origins going right back to



the tactical errors made in the founding of the Communist Party of Italy in 1921. More recent errors have also been criticised (such as the attempt to use elections for revolutionary ends in the forties). Similarly, the P.C.Int. tried at this time to apply the old Comintern tactic of a "united front from below" but this was quickly criticised and abandoned. It was this which the ICC has called an appeal to Stalinists (implying it was aimed at the Stalinist parties and not simply workers who had come under their orbit). The P.C.Int.'s brief reply in Battaglia Comunista has been translated as an appendix to this article. One other slander, that the P.C.Int. "flirted" with the partisans at the end of World War Two must also be dealt with. Again the ICC in more honest mood, in their pamphlet on the Italian Left give the lie to their own recent slander:

"In the face of the partisans war the P.C.Int. was very clear; no aid, no participation, but appeals to fraternisation of workers in uniform on both sides, incitement to the revival of the class struggle on its specific terrain - the factories." (op. cit. p.170)

The same pamphlet also points out that hundreds of workers were won away from the partisans in this period by the P.C.Int., an achievement which cost the lives of two members of the P.C.Int. Acquaviva and Atti. This is what the ICC's "flirting" with the partisans really amounts to. Those who don't do anything are, however, at an advantage when it comes to criticism of the actions of others. Fighting where the working class is, however bleak the prospect, in an attempt to maintain the physical continuity of the communist programme within the working class, instead of retreating into isolation, seems to be the factors



which separated the followers of Damen from the founders of the ICC.

## The Sectarianism of the ICC

Today's ICC practice is pure sectarianism. Since the setback to the work of the International Conferences in 1980 and their 1981 splits the ICC's public utterances have become increasingly irresponsible. Accusing the P.C. Int of being "imbued with Bordigist self-satisfaction" they accuse the P.C.Int. and the CWO of excluding the ICC from the conferences:

"... not after a profound discussion, but a priori, after a manoeuvre worthy of the most sinister intrigues of Zinoviev in the degenerating Communist International. What a fine school Bordigism is! (International Review 32 p.13)

Strong stuff. The truth of the matter is more prosaic. The P.C.Int. proposed that a seventh criterion be added to the existing six. This called for:

"Recognition of the organising role of the party in the daily struggle of the working class as in the revolution itself."

Contrary to ICC claims, all three conferences concentrated on the tasks of revolutionaries and the criterion seemed to sum up what a number of groups had been saying at the third conference. It was also a means of clarifying what those like the ICC were avoiding. The ICC agreed that the party should exist, that it should be an active factor in the class struggle, yet they couldn't define a single activity for the party apart from propaganda. The ICC still have to resolve this problem and the latest International Review indicates that it will take them some while since they dismiss the contributions of the CWO and the P.C.Int as making a "fetish" of the party. This is again an attempt to slander us as Bordigist since they claim that the existence of the party is the only indispensable condition for the emancipation of the proletariat. For us it is an indispensable condition but not the only one.

It's about time the ICC made its deeds match its words. The ICC criticises, on paper, monolithism yet the one thing all the splitters from the ICC in 1981 agreed on was that the ICC stifles internal debate. The ICC talks of "continuing debate" but whilst the CWO invites to our annual meetings we have never been invited to a single World Revolution Congress. Recent ICC public meetings have refused CWO members the right of reply yet CWO meetings always offer other groups extended opportunity for intervention and a summing up at the end. We don't do this out of liberalism but out of the recognition that only a real confrontation of ideas - aimed always at a resolution of differences - is the only way for political clarity to emerge. On this at least we remain "invariant".

### Footnotes to the article

1) See Revolutionary Perspectives 19 Crisis of the Revolutionary Movement or Crisis of the ICC. and Workers Voice 8 WR - Miseries of the Organisation.

2) From BP 581, 75027 Paris Cedex 01 FRANCE. It costs 30.francs. We will review it in a future issue.

3) See Workers Voice 10 Bordigism: the Crumbling Monolith

4) See Revolutionary Perspectives 19 Theories of State Capitalism

5) See Bordiga: validita e limiti d'una esperienza nella storia della "sinistra italiana". From C.P. 1/53 Milano (Italy)

## Appendix

### ON ORIGINS

It is well-known that in polemical exchanges the side with invalid arguments resorts to crafty manoeuvres, including rhetoric and demagoguery. Thus, for example, the ICC - arguing in its International Review 32 on the crisis of Programma Comunista - pretends to find the original sins which spell damnation for the PCInt (or at least for one of its off-shoots which broke away in 1952) in the origins of the PCInt itself, and therefore in the 1943-45 period.

Since we don't want to have a long article here, we'll only make some brief points.

1) Was the document "Appeal of the Agitation Committee of the PCInt.", printed in Prometeo 1 in April 1945 an error? Granted - it was. It was the last attempt by the Italian Left to implement the tactic of the "united front from below", a tactic announced by the PCI in its polemics with the International between 1921-23. As such, we put it amongst our "pardonable sins" because the clarity of our comrades enabled them to wipe it out of the organisation once and for all, both on the political and theoretical level. Today this clarity allows us to stand confident in front of anyone.

2) Here and there other tactical errors have been made and, without waiting for the ICC, we ourselves have spent quite some time reviewing our tactics. Indeed, we are continually reviewing them so that we are guarded against repetition of errors.

3) He who stands firm and never moves never makes mistakes. But there isn't anyone who never makes a mistake. Thus, in the middle of the imperialist war, while the exploited masses who were being driven to the slaughter were showing some first signs of reacting and moving towards a break with interclassist forces linked to the imperialist blocs, the ancestors of the ICC - standing as they were in the midst of war - considered the proletariat to be defeated because it had ... accepted the war and they never thought for a minute of "soiling their hands" with the workers' movement.

4) Afterwards, when they considered that the proletariat was no longer prostrate and defeated, they reappeared, having gathered a few students and captious intellectuals to "fertilise" the new revolutionary struggles which were about to occur and which would carry us gloriously straight to the revolution. And here we have the really fundamental error of the ICC. The ICC's original sin is really - in this as in other questions - in its approach to the problem of the relationship between the class, its consciousness and the party. If (and we are

saying if, because it is an increasing probability to be considered) war breaks out before the working class rises up, the ICC will only be able to pack up and go home, while yet again we will "soil our hands" and work practically, as far as our organised forces will allow, for revolutionary defeatism - both during and after the war, just as we did in the last war.

5) In this respect, Programma's errors are great, as is its basic opportunism. We have already written about this (see the last issue of Battaglia comunista) and also about the fact that very important questions remain "open" inside Programma comunista (notwithstanding their saying the contrary): the questions of imperialism, national wars and, take note, the union question. These issues opened up the crisis in Programma, just as the ICC's open questions have led it into crisis.

And, if we may say so, isn't this what we wrote in no. 15/16 of December 1981? In "Crisis of the ICC or Crisis of the Revol-

utionary Movement?"\* we said,

"only certain individual organisations"

were in crisis - the ICC and Programma. These organisations who maintain internal cohesion only by failing to have clear ideas on the major problems, break up when these issues emerge as intensely important in one way or another (whether they lead to a step forward or a step back). They are crisis-ridden organisations which don't last in the revolutionary movement. They appear as "living" organisations only while the objective situation isn't moving - just as a dead weight holds firm so long as the equilibrium isn't disturbed.

Translated from Battaglia comunista 3, 10th-28th April 1985

\* Translated and published by the CWO in Revolutionary Perspectives 19

## The Lost Revolution and the SWP

### Review

"The Lost Revolution", C. Harman,  
publ. Bookmarks, London

The main theme of this book is the absence of a strongly organised communist party in Germany during the revolutionary wave at the end of the 1st World War. Harman is absolutely correct when he states that the main reason for the defeat of the German Revolution was not the lack of combativity of the working class, or an unfavourable objective situation, but the failure of revolutionaries to have formed a coherent communist party, which already had roots in the class, before the last minute.

After itself accepting that German workers should die for capital, Social Democracy split into a right-wing and centrist faction, called the USPD during the war. But, unlike Lenin, who at Zimmerwald had presented a separate programme, based on revolutionary defeatism, against the vacillations of the centrists, the Spartacists believed that "the worst working class party is better than none" (Luxemburg) and stayed in the centrist group inside Social Democracy because it had mass working class support and, unlike Lenin, they feared isolation from the class. They did not see that isolation in 1914-16 was a prerequisite for forming a programmatically clear communist party later.

Referring to the Spartakist Week, Harman says:

"Luxemburg's tactical error is not to be explained by anything that happened in December or January, but by a much earlier error - when in 1912 and 1916 she underrated the importance of building an independent revolutionary party. ... The contrast with Lenin's repeated insistence on the independence of revolutionaries from 'centrists' could not have been sharper, and helped prepare the ground for the tragic quandary faced by Rosa Luxemburg and the German Revolution in 1919." (p.95)

However, it's not at all clear from his analysis WHY they should have split. There is a world of difference between a communist analysis of the need to organise politically independent of Social Democracy (because these parties had revealed themselves as bourgeois by supporting their own national capitals during the war) than the SWP's theoretical fog which parrots the need for a strong communist party whilst continually counter-posing the SPD and the USPD to the "bourgeois parties". Obviously communists today must stress the necessity for the political and organisational independence of the working class and to clearly differentiate the objectives of the proletariat from those of the bourgeoisie. As we said in Revolutionary Perspectives 7

"Instead of concentrating on building a coherent revolutionary organisation on the basis of the revolutionary minorities that had already broken with Social Democracy, the Spartacists decided to remain within its fold. The leaders argued that by remaining inside as a revolutionary opposition the disintegration of the USPD would be hastened and the best elements more easily won over to revolutionary positions. In practice, however, the Spartacists remained a small, isolated minority within a strengthening USPD and when the revolution broke out in November 1918 they had patently failed to distinguish their programme from that of the USPD to the vast majority of the working class."

The SWP, however, despite talk of being a "revolutionary alternative" in the past, has not shown a commitment to maintaining the programmatic independence of the working class in practice. The reasons for this are apparent in Harman's book. The SWP just does not understand the implications for previously reformist



organisations and today helps to strengthen the illusions that the working class has in organisations like the Labour Party and the trade unions. Thus, despite a lengthy narrative in which Harman describes the counter-revolutionary role that Social Democracy played in the German Revolution, he completely fails to understand the class nature of all factions of Social Democracy. For example, he shows how in the months of revolutionary struggle after the war the German bourgeoisie were able to use the Social Democrats to hold back the struggle:

"The bourgeois political parties were in deep crisis, their leaders wondering how they were going to save anything. They knew that their only salvation lay with the Social Democrats that they had so despised in the past." (p.52)

When the rising began among the revolutionary sailors in Kiel a Social Democratic leader was sent to "prevent the rising spreading throughout the fleet". The sailors, still sharing illusions in Social Democracy, invited Noske to be chairman of the Sailors' Council. Harman says,

"Noske emerged as the representative of the government charged with putting down the revolution in Kiel and as the representative of the sailors and workers expected to carry the revolution forward. In the days that followed he used his position to prevent a destruction of German capitalism or of the structures - the hierarchies in the army, the police, the civil service - that had protected it for so many years." (p.47)

This, in a nutshell, is the danger facing the proletariat. Posing as a friend, the Social Democrats are the most deadly enemy. Communists therefore have to expose their true nature and that involves showing that at all times the Social Democrats, the Labour parties, are not a lesser evil.

Has the SWP learnt this lesson? We don't think so. Take, for example, the Kapp Putsch of 1920. This was an attempt to overthrow the Social Democratic government by the right-wing nationalists, assisted by the same paramilitary Freikorps that Noske had used to murder the communists. The Army in general, which had also aided the Social Democrats, stood on the sidelines, "benevolently neutral" in Kapp's favour. This pushed the Social Democrats into calling for the thing they most dreaded, mass class action. Their general strike call brought out the workers en masse, and they were not just simply giving support to the Social Democrats. The KPD's policy oscillated between stupidity and opportunism. They at first said they "wouldn't lift a finger" to help those who had been responsible for the massacre of the revolutionary workers but later the Party agreed to act as a "loyal opposition" to the SPD, meekly calling off the action when the immediate Kapp danger had passed. This split the class even further, since the Ruhr workers carried on fighting in isolation whilst the KPD pact gave the SPD a free hand to massacre them.

What should the KPD have done? Well, as Lenin said at the time (acknowledged, but brushed aside by Harman), the Kapp Putsch was analogous to the Kornilov affair of September 1917 in Russia. In that, a right-wing general, and Commander in Chief of the Provisional Government's Army, marched on Petrograd to overthrow Kerensky and install a military dictatorship.

Two months earlier, Kerensky, like the SPD in Germany, had massacred revolutionaries in the July Days. Lenin's answer was to participate fully in the fight against Kornilov alongside the masses and not openly against Kerensky.

"We shall fight, we are fighting against Kornilov, just as Kerensky's troops do, but we do not support Kerensky. On the contrary, we expose his weakness. There is the difference. It is rather a subtle difference, but it is highly essential and must not be forgotten." (To the Central Committee of the RSDLP Coll. Works Volume. 25 p.286)

However, Lenin recognised two things, the levée en masse against Kornilov would become a levée against Kerensky if the communists got involved in it, and secondly - what position would Kerensky be in once the armed people had defeated his army chief? The answer was given in the ease with which the proletariat took over Petrograd six weeks later.

Harman prefers to equivocate by discussing another tactic Lenin adopted in August 1917, of seeking a temporary alliance with Mensheviks and SRs to overthrow the Provisional Government and establish Soviet power. This has got absolutely nothing in common with the problems posed by the Kapp Putsch. The Mensheviks and SRs were not the government at the time, the SPD were. Lenin's aim was to establish Soviet power, not re-establish parliamentary government. Instead of learning from the mistakes communists made in the past, Harman makes a virtue of them. On the question of the "loyal opposition" Harman states,

"The formulation was well designed. It provided a basis for joint action with social democratic workers against the right-wing ministers, without making the communists responsible for the actions of a 'left government' that still acted within the confines of capitalism." (p.175)

So a formula which divides the most conscious workers and leads to their massacre was "well designed". And if there is any doubt left that Harman and the SWP understand anything about the counter-revolutionary nature of Social Democracy or the necessity of the independence of the working class organisation, there is the statement that an equation cannot be made of "Social Democratic government, however miserable and murderous, with an all-out right-wing dictatorship". For Harman this is mere "ultra-leftism". He fails to see that Social Democracy suits the interests of the bourgeoisie one moment, right-wing dictatorship another. In 1920 Social Democracy best suited the purposes of the bourgeoisie by being the force most capable of destroying the proletariat by appearing as a "workers government" and only the more backward sections of the German capitalist class rallied round the banner of Kapp. In fact you could say that it wasn't only the KPD that kept a "loyal opposition" to the SPD - so did the Wehrmacht.

Adding insult to injury, he argues that,

"What was lacking was solid organisation and leadership within the working class ... And the left independents did not have a structure capable of implementing decisions independently of the right." (p.185)

and goes on to state that Lenin "seemed to

agree" (p.204) with the workers' government proposal. What he omits to mention is that Lenin agreed with the general analysis that the dictatorship of the proletariat was not on the immediate agenda in Germany and that the KPD were correct to refrain from a direct assault on power. Meanwhile, so long as the majority of the workers were following the Independents, Lenin argued that the Communist Party must not prevent the working class overcoming their "last philistine-democratic (i.e. also "bourgeois-capitalist") illusions" (Left Wing Communism p.116) What Lenin also emphasised was that

"social traitors cannot be described ... as a "socialist government; that one cannot speak of the exclusion of "bourgeois capitalist parties", when the parties both of the Scheidemanns and of Messrs. the Kautskys and Crispiens are petty bourgeois-democratic parties." (p.115)

The point eludes the SWP.

Having failed to grasp the fundamentally capitalist nature of Social Democracy, even with 60 years of experience before it, the SWP has no framework at all for criticising the united front policy adopted by the KPD at the end of 1921 (even before the Comintern did so in 1922). On the contrary, the SWP still praises the united front as a correct tactic to attempt to win over Social Democratic workers in the fight against fascism in Germany in 1922 and 1923. It doesn't seem to understand that it is a contradiction to say that the communists should have broken from Social Democracy earlier than they did and then, after Social Democracy had massacred them, advise the Communist party to work alongside it! The central weakness of the analysis is to see democracy, in particular Social Democracy, as a more progressive form of capitalist rule than any other, like fascism. To communists the question now is proletarian revolution or barbarism - fascism and Social Democracy both offer barbarism. Look at the fate of the united front. This became 'anti-fascism' or 'anti-Nazism' and in the end provided the ideology for workers to massacre each other in a second imperialist war under the leadership of well known progressives like Churchill, de Gaulle and Stalin.

The united front policy was an attempt to hold on to the masses at a time when the revolutionary wave was exhausted. As a result it was a symptom of defeat, not a policy for recovery. This analysis was made at the time by the Italian Communist Party led by Bordiga. Fascism could not have arisen in either Italy or Germany had not Social Democracy already defeated the working class. To then place the working class in a position of support for Social Democracy is to ensure that the real lesson of that defeat remains obscured.

Given the SWP's complete failure to see any implications of the opening up of the revolutionary epoch for the class nature of Social Democracy and reformist organisations in general, it's not surprising that Harman's treatment of the role of the trade unions doesn't even begin to deal with this problem. His analysis doesn't go beyond the most predictable remarks - previously unorganised workers (e.g. agricultural workers) joining trade unions is (correctly) seen as a sign of their being more involved in the class struggle (although the question of the political direction of the unions they joined is not dealt with); the KPD's initial policy not to work inside the trade unions is dismissed as

another example of impatience and "ultra-leftism" without further elaboration of the problem. The fact that during the revolution a large part of the most class conscious workers left the trade unions as they experienced their counter-revolutionary policies, and formed factory organisations on a primarily political basis, is glossed over. Harman quotes figures showing that the unions grew in the 1918-21 period but totally ignores the fact that in the most militant areas revolutionary workers were leaving the unions. (In the Ruhr alone the factory organisations had 90,000 members). This is a bit like discussing the Russian working class in 1917 but ignoring the workers in Putilov.

While the KPD was mistaken at its foundation Congress to adopt a policy of not working inside the existing trade unions without an alternative policy of how to keep contact with the masses who were still inside them, Harman is right to point out that the Party

"looked at the minority of revolutionary workers and forgot the millions who were just joining the unions for the first time." (p.52)

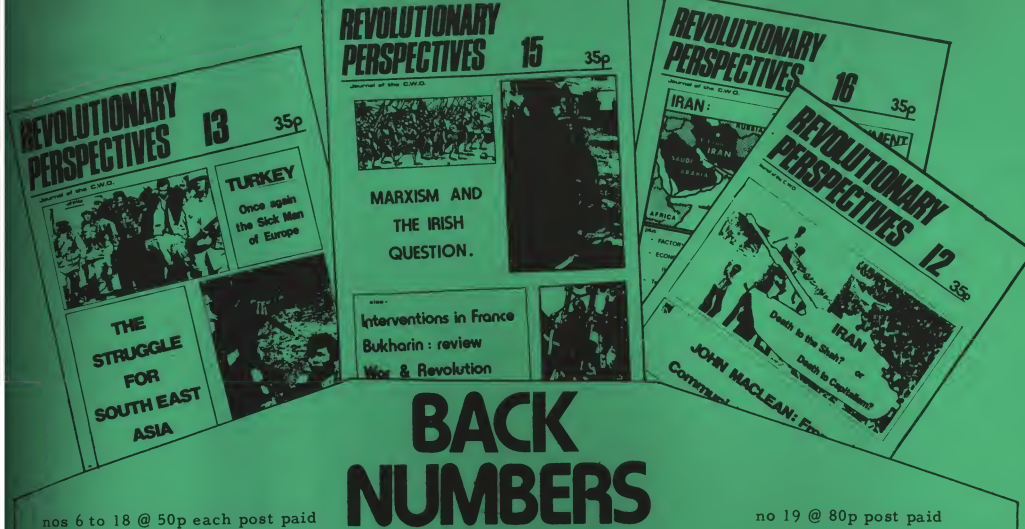
but he himself avoids an analysis of the role of the breakaway organisations which emerged as the most class conscious workers tried to keep the factory committees and workers' councils alive. In fact Harman's analysis doesn't go beyond a criticism of the "reformist approach of the trade union bureaucracy" and doesn't allow him to begin to consider the fundamentally reactionary part played by the trade unions in the German Revolution. Unable to see the complexities of the trade union question for revolutionaries, he can't see any reason to debate the issue. Towards the end of 1919 the KPD Centrale changed its policy without debate and against the majority of the party and adopted a policy of working in the trade unions to capture their leaderships. Harman's "benefit of hindsight" policy to have avoided the disastrous split which occurred (the majority of the party were automatically expelled when they voted against the policy at the October Congress) is a real example of how not to treat political differences when they arise in a revolutionary party. Instead of arguing that the issue should have been fully debated within the party, he recommends an organisational manoeuvre:

"The party leadership would have done better to have pushed through its own policies at the Congress and then taken on and removed the most irreconcilable opposition figures in the localities one at a time ..." (p.153)

This of course is not a new tactic. It was also used successfully by one Josef Vissiaronovich Djughashvili, i.e. Stalin.

As a narrative of events, this book might be useful to readers who are new to the German Revolution. Even here though, some occurrences don't get the treatment they deserve, because the author fails to see the significance of them (e.g. the split in the KPD 1919 and the formation of the KAPD after the Kapp Putsch; the emergence of the factory organisations which broke from the trade unions). As a means for would-be revolutionaries today to understand the lessons of the German experience, the book gets nowhere near providing a revolutionary framework. In this respect The Lost Revolution confirms that a revolutionary perspective is lost to the SWP.





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#### POSITIONS OF THE COMMUNIST WORKERS ORGANISATION

\*\* Every country in the world today is capitalist - including the so-called Communist states (for example Russia and China).

\*\* Trade Unions and shop stewards cannot defend the interests of the working class.

\*\* The struggle for communism cannot be waged through Parliament, but must be carried out through workers' councils with recallable delegates.

\*\* The working class can only come to power through the creation of its own political party - the international communist party.

\*\* The capitalist system is in crisis and irretrievable decline. It can only offer inflation and unemployment and it cannot be reformed. The only choice for the future is war or revolution: BARBARISM or COMMUNISM.